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Loss of Meaning, Meaning-making Processes, and Posttraumatic Growth among Prisoners

Siebrecht Vanhooren

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Unexpected life events can threaten our meaning system and can eventually lead to a loss of meaning. This loss of meaning is accompanied by distress (Park, 2010). In order to cope with this distress, individuals engage in subsequent meaning-making processes. From an existential point of view, the best case scenario is that people gain new meaning in life (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). A profound shift in how people experience meaning and perceive the world is called posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Previously, studies on meaning and posttraumatic growth have been conducted almost exclusively in non-offender samples. However, Janoff-Bulman (2013) argues that violating one's own moral standards can also threaten one's meaning system. Being incarcerated as a consequence of a crime one has committed could lead to a loss of meaning and distress. In this doctoral dissertation, we explore the loss of meaning, meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth among prisoners.

Chapter 1 introduces important theories and concepts such as the meaning-making model (Park, 2010), and posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In Chapter 2, we explore whether the experience of incarceration creates a loss of meaning among prisoners. The results of a cross-sectional study (n = 365) showed that a loss of meaning predicted distress in prison. Chapter 3 focuses on the predictive value of coping strategies as meaning-making processes on posttraumatic growth among prisoners. Emotional support, religious coping and search for meaning were found to be positive predictors, whereas behavioral disengagement was found to be a negative predictor of posttraumatic growth. In Chapter 4 we asked the question whether posttraumatic growth among offenders might be associated with less distress. Our mixed-method pilot study affirmed this hypothesis. Chapter 5 offers a different approach to meaning and the search for meaning in life. A person-oriented methodological approach (cluster analysis) made it possible to distinguish four distinct profiles of meaning. Prisoners with profiles that were marked by higher levels of meaning experienced less distress, more positive world assumptions, higher levels of self-worth, and more care for others compared to prisoners with low meaning profiles. Greater numbers of older prisoners and prisoners who were sexually abused in childhood were represented in the profile that was marked by extremely low levels of meaning and low levels of search for meaning. In Chapter 6 we applied a phenomenological method to explore the prison experiences, coping strategies and signs of posttraumatic growth of ten prisoners. Participants mostly tried to cope through emotional support from others. The main source of their meaning in life was to be found in their deepened relationships with their family. In Chapter 7, we present a case study on how to support meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth in psychotherapy during incarceration. Being offered a safe, non-judgmental space, the client could explore the basic existential needs which were associated with the crime. Psychotherapy supported the development of a more nuanced set of meanings and a richer pallet of coping skills. Finally, the main findings are discussed and suggestions for future research are formulated in Chapter 8. A deeper understanding of the existential challenges that prisoners have to face can help them to lead a more meaningful and pro-social life in the future.

Siebrecht Vanhooren

Betekenisverlies, Zingevingsprocessen en Posttraumatische Groei bij Gedetineerden

Proefschrift aangeboden tot het verkrijgen van de graad Doctor in de Psychologie

2015

Supervisor: Prof. dr. Mia Leijssen Co-Supervisor: Prof. dr. Jessie Dezutter

Onverwachte levenswendingen kunnen een bedreiging voor het zingevingssysteem van mensen vormen. Die ervaring kan gepaard gaan met verlies van persoonlijke zingeving, wat aanleiding geeft tot psychisch lijden (Park, 2010). Volgens Park (2010) reageren mensen op stressvolle situaties met diverse zingevingsprocessen. In het beste geval ontwikkelen ze als antwoord op de existentiële crisis een meer genuanceerd zingevingssysteem (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). Ingrijpende positieve veranderingen op vlak van zingeving en levensdoelen worden ook posttraumatische groei genoemd (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Onderzoek naar zingevingsprocessen en posttraumatische groei bij gedetineerden gebeurde tot nog toe nauwelijks. Toch kan het plegen van een misdrijf eveneens een bedreiging inhouden voor iemands zingevingssysteem (Janoff-Bulman, 2013). Zo kan detentie mogelijks aanleiding zijn tot een diepe existentiële crisis. In deze doctorale studie verkennen wij betekenisverlies, zingevingsprocessen en posttraumatische groei bij gedetineerden.

Hoofdstuk 1 introduceert theorieën betreffende zingevingsprocessen (Park, 2010) en posttraumatische groei (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Hoofdstuk 2 buigt zich over de vraag of detentie inderdaad tot betekenisverlies leidt en of dit gepaard gaat met psychisch lijden. De resultaten van de cross-sectionele studie (n = 365) tonen aan dat betekenisverlies voorspellend is voor psychisch lijden tijdens detentie. Hoofdstuk 3 exploreert de voorspellende waarde van coping strategieën op posttraumatische groei. Emotionele ondersteuning, religie en het zoeken naar zingeving voorspellen inderdaad posttraumatische groei, terwijl opgeven met zoeken tot minder posttraumatische groei leidt. In Hoofdstuk 4 vragen we ons af of posttraumatische groei vervolgens gepaard gaat met minder psychisch lijden. De pilootstudie bevestigt deze vraag. Hoofdstuk 5 belicht zingeving en zoeken naar betekenis vanuit een persoonsgerichte methodologische benadering (cluster analyse). Daarbij tonen zich vier verschillende zingevingsprofielen. Gevangenen met profielen die gekenmerkt zijn door een hoger niveau van zingeving, vertonen minder psychisch lijden, een positievere houding naar de wereld, meer zelfwaarde en meer zorg naar anderen toe. Oudere gevangenen en gedetineerden die tijdens hun kindertijd seksueel misbruikt werden, zijn oververtegenwoordigd in een profiel dat gekenmerkt is door een extreem laag niveau van zingeving en een laag niveau van zoeken naar betekenis. Hoofdstuk 6 presenteert een fenomenologisch onderzoek naar detentie-ervaringen, zingevingsprocessen en posttraumatische groei bij tien gedetineerden. De deelnemers aan dit onderzoek tonen dat ze vooral dankzij emotionele ondersteuning met hun betekenisverlies kunnen omgaan. Verdiepte relaties met anderen worden door deze gedetineerden als een nieuwe bron van zingeving ervaren. In Hoofdstuk 7 wordt met een gevalsstudie concreet gemaakt hoe zingevingsprocessen en posttraumatische groei ondersteund worden in psychotherapie. De niet-veroordelende houding van de therapeut biedt de cliënt de ruimte om stil te staan bij de existentiële noden die onder het misdrijf schuilgaan. Psychotherapie faciliteert de ontwikkeling van een meer genuanceerd zingevingssysteem. Hoofdstuk 8 besluit met de belangrijkste bevindingen en suggesties voor verder onderzoek. Een dieper begrip van specifieke existentiële uitdagingen bij gedetineerden bevordert de uitbouw van een betekenisvollere toekomst met meer zelfreflectie en betere relaties met anderen.

Woord Vooraf

Op mijn bureau op het Centrum Geestelijke Gezondheidszorg Prisma ligt een muismatje met de woorden: "Wie durft te verdwalen vindt nieuwe wegen." Ik kreeg het ooit als verjaardagdagscadeau van een zeer empathische collega. Op één of andere manier loopt mijn leven niet altijd over de geijkte paden. Kronkelwegen brengen me echter waar ik blijkbaar moet zijn. Naast mijn wegen naar Santiago de Compostela, Jeruzalem, en Waschington DC leidde er ook een spoor naar Leuven. Dirk Debbaut en Pol Verhelst wakkerden het vuur in mij aan om me via een doctoraatsstudie te verdiepen in wat me sinds jaar en dag het meest boeit in mensen: hun eeuwig zoeken naar zingeving en betekenis. Met Viktor Frankl onder de arm stapte ik naar Mia Leijssen. Mia onthaalde mij en het idee om een doctorale studie rond zingeving aan te vatten op een zeer hartelijke manier. Het duurde niet lang voor Jessie Dezutter mee aan de tafel kwam zitten. De manier waarop het project van wal stak zou meteen het ganse doctoraat kenmerken: duidelijk, omlijnd, efficiënt en gezwind. De wind is nooit gaan liggen. Mia en Jessie hebben het als promotoren mogelijk gemaakt dat deze dissertatie er vandaag ligt. Op haar intuïtieve wijze heeft Mia mij meermaals de weg gewezen. Met haar taalgevoeligheid spoorde ze me telkens aan om de zaken net iets beter te formuleren. Haar holistische blik hield me op het juiste spoor. Jessie was de onmisbare gids doorheen het labyrinth van de wetenschap. Zonder haar zou ik al snel gestrand zijn. Gedurende het ganse traject heb ik me gezegend mogen weten met mijn beide promotoren. Ik mag het een buitengewone ervaring noemen.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

In 2009 Beernem[1] mental health clinic in Belgium started a new project[2] to offer individual, non-compulsory psychotherapy in Brugge prison. In contrast with the prison's own psychologists and social workers, the psychotherapists of the Beernem project would keep maximum confidentiality for the prisoners in relation to the prison authorities and the court. Right from the start many prisoners found their way to this new service. It became clear that there was a real need for therapy among the prisoners, which resulted in long waiting lists. Prisoners brought very different questions to therapy and the therapists heard stories quite different from those heard by the institution's own psychologists. Whereas the prison psychologists had to deal with distrust from the prisoners, the same prisoners opened up and showed their vulnerability towards the psychotherapists. The underlying theme of these prisoners' stories was their inner struggle with existential themes such as guilt, defeat, loneliness and meaning in life. Surprisingly, many of these clients experienced profound shifts during therapy. Not only did they gain insight into their personal dynamics or retrace the antecedents of their crime, but they also seemed to have changed in a profound way. These changes were noticeable on many levels. On a personal level, these clients seemed to have discovered themselves for the first time in their life. Instead of running away from their feelings and history, they took interest to their inner experiences and showed more self-care. This also resulted in more care for their body,

1 CGG Prisma, Beernem.
2 Patend (Psychotherapeutisch Aanbod Tijdens En Na Detentie).

physical appearance, and care for their daily environment. On a social level, they became better partners. They seemed to develop better listening skills and appreciate other people as individuals with their own needs and interests. On a spiritual level, they experienced important changes in their purpose and meaning in life. Some of them experienced religion as an important source of meaning. The initial experience common to all these clients was one of profound loss. These losses in turn led to a general loss of meaning. The therapeutic process was marked by a search for new meaning regarding themselves, their relationships and also the meaning of life. Meaning was a central recurrent element at the onset of therapy, throughout the process and an important part of the outcome of the therapy.

Forensic literature only rarely reports profound positive personal change or *posttraumatic growth* among prisoners. Posttraumatic growth – or a fundamental shift in how people experience themselves, others, and the world – has been described among victims of different threatening circumstances (e.g. Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). According to Tedeschi & Calhoun (2004) posttraumatic growth only emerges as a result of individuals processing the issues that came along with the seismic life event. Although our clients were not the victims of their own offences, the crime also had a devastating effect on them. Incarceration amplified this effect and led often to a personal, relational, and existential breakdown. It became clear that the posttraumatic growth experienced was closely connected to this existential crisis. The *meaning-making model* of Crystal Park (2010) clarifies how people usually engage in meaning-making processes as an answer to their existential crisis, and how this can result in posttraumatic growth.

Loss of Meaning, Meaning-making Processes, and Posttraumatic Growth

The meaning-making model (Park, 2010) assumes that there are at least two levels of meaning (Figure 1). *Global meanings*, also called the *meaning system,* are a personal set of assumptions, beliefs, goals, and affects, which include the self-image and meaning and purpose in life. They help individuals to interpret and appraise the meaning of the actual situation (the *appraised meaning*) and give direction to choices and actions on a daily basis. Common experiences rarely challenge global meanings because they don't contradict one's expectations (Park, 2010). It is only when life fails to meet one's general expectations that the meaning system is challenged. Consequently, the experience of unexpected life events often leads to a threat to the meaning system and to the loss of meaning. Eventually this can trigger a long process of searching for new meanings and purposes in life (Park, 2010).

Park's *meaning-making model* (2010) suggests that the distress that is experienced during disruptive life events is caused by the fact that the appraised meaning of a situation (e.g. "I am diagnosed with cancer", "I am crying for help", "My life is falling apart.") threatens central global meanings (e.g. "I will live until I am 80 years old", "I am completely independent", "My life makes sense."), which can lead to a loss of meaning (Figure 1). According to this model, people will engage in *meaning-making processes* to reduce the distress they are experiencing. These meaning-making processes aim either to change the appraised meaning in order to save the integrity of the meaning system (assimilation) or to adjust the global meaning to accommodate to the challenges of the new situation. In the first case coping

strategies such as denial, distortion, or downward comparison processes are used to change one's initial appraisals (Park & Folkman, 1997). In the case of accommodation, people embark for a longer period in a search for new goals in life and a new sense of meaningfulness. The larger the impact of the life crisis, the more likely that people feel the need to search for new meanings (Park, 2010).

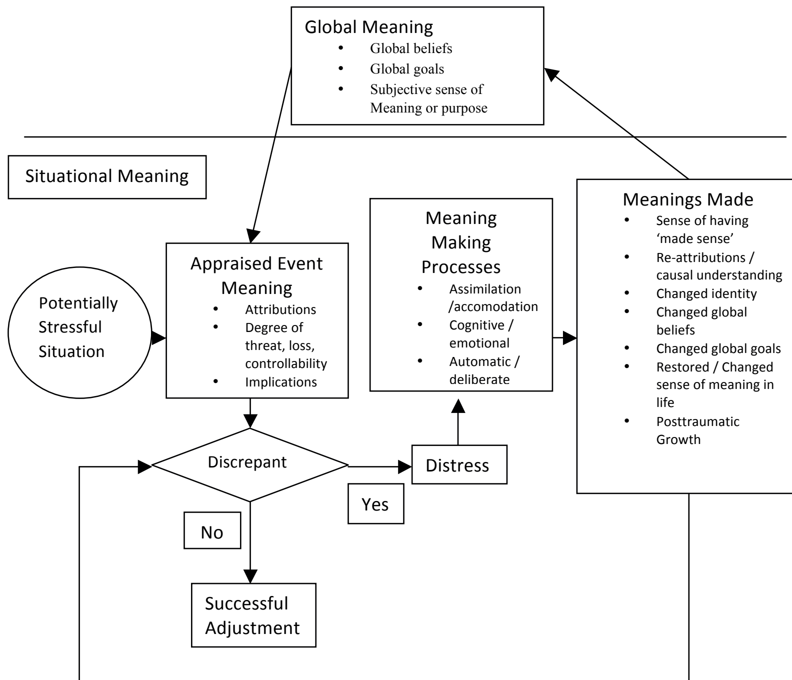

Figure 1. Meaning-making model (Park, 2010)

In this model, the results or products of the meaning-making processes are called *meanings made*. Park (2010) argues that these meanings made complete the meaning-making cycle and that these new meanings are accompanied by adjustment to the situation and a decrease of distress. Examples of such meanings

made are: a new identity, a changed life narrative, a deeper insight in personal dynamics, new meaning and purposes in life, and the experience that it "made sense" to go through all this (Park, 2010). The content of the new meaning system can influence the person's future. People who come to experience the world as a harmful place might become more aggressive or, on the other hand, very anxious. This might create a negative spiral wherein they become more vulnerable to a subsequent distressing experience as a victim or a violator (Park & Folkman, 1997). Alternatively, the content of the new meaning system might increase people's resilience towards a next distressing experience. This gives credence to the popular idea that people can learn from crisis and get stronger (Joseph, 2011). For example, people who engage in a more self-transcendent purpose show a higher degree of well-being and a higher sense of meaningfulness (Steger, 2012). Their meaning system also seems to be more resistant to the potential negative consequences of future traumatic experiences (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2012).

Posttraumatic growth is a special kind of meaning made that has been described as a profound change in how people experience themselves, others, and the world as a consequence of a distressing life experience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). For example, people have reported more personal strength, a deeper appreciation of relationships, a shift in their priorities in life, a different philosophy of life, and a deeper appreciation of life itself.

In the literature, different elements of the meaning-making process and posttraumatic growth have been studied in victims of life-threatening illnesses (Milam, 2006; Park 2013; Silver & Updegraff, 2013; Stanton et al., 2006), in victims of sexual assault and domestic violence (de Castella & Simmonds, 2012; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), and in victims of war, terrorist attacks, and

natural disasters (Rosner & Poswell, 2006; Silver & Updegraff, 2013). The meaning-making model as an overarching theory has gained a broad consensus among researchers and clinical workers. But when it comes to the empirical support of the model, the story is more complicated. Park (2008, 2010) argues that the model as such has hardly been tested, even though she concludes that there is strong support for at least some aspects of the meaning-making model. First, there is solid evidence that meaning-making processes and meanings made are reported by most of the individuals who face highly distressing events. Second, she found that appraised meanings of violation and loss are associated with distress (Park, 2008) and threat appraisals are constantly related to more distress (Park, 2010). Third, the content of the meanings made is important (Park, 2010). For example, posttraumatic growth would lead to more resilience in the future (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2012).

Although the emphasis in these empirical studies is mainly on victims, Janoff-Bulman (2013) argued that violating one's own moral standards can be shocking as well. In this way, being incarcerated as a consequence of one's own actions might also lead to the loss of meaning. For example, it is hard to cling to assumptions such as, "I am a good person, people are trustworthy, and the world is a safe place," while being in prison for committing a murder. As Jamieson and Grounds (2011) suggest, this theory of the "disruption of the assumptive world" or a loss of meaning could shed a revealing light on the actual cause of prison distress (p.59). Moreover, it could help us to understand why many prisoners experience distress during incarceration (Jamieson & Grounds, 2011).

Meaning and Search for Meaning from a Clinical Perspective: The Case of Simon

Based on our own clinical work with prisoners in the context of psychotherapy, we not only recognize that incarceration and the crime are often experienced as a distressing life experience; we also have witnessed the difference stages of Park's meaning making model (2010) in prisoners. One client, whom we will call Simon[3], was imprisoned after a life-threatening attack in which he stabbed his brother with a knife. Simon experienced a total breakdown of his meaning in life in the early stages of his incarceration. He was referred to our services (CGG Prisma in the Belgian prison of Brugge) after a suicide attempt. Simon was deeply in shock that he had lost control of himself and severely injured his brother. His perception was that he had lost everything that was worth living for: his job, his house, his material belongings, the relationships with his partner, his children and his whole family, his pride, his dreams, his hopes, his future, his purposes, and his will to live. Deep inside, he experienced a total emptiness. He didn't recognize himself anymore, he couldn't make sense of the crime, and he felt deeply ashamed by his imprisonment. He avoided contact with other prisoners as much as possible, felt unsafe in the prison building, and feared he was turning into a "prison number." After his first therapy session, Simon experienced an important shift because he had the feeling that somebody – the therapist – had taken him seriously and listened to him without judgment. As a result, in the second session he started to reflect on his life in an attempt to understand what caused the crime. Simon's reflections continued between sessions. Thinking about the past and trying

3 Simon is a pseudonym. Simon agreed that we could use his story for publication.

to understand what happened gave him the feeling that he was spending his time in a meaningful way. As a consequence, he experienced a sparkle of hope and began to think about his future possibilities. He explained: "I don't want to go on like I did in the past, working too much, always going over my boundaries, putting pressure on people... I want to live a more simple life, to enjoy nature and to restore the contact with my children. I am not interested any more in material belongings. There are more important things to live for." Simon also experienced a shift in values as he became more spiritual during his prison time. Not only therapy but also reading the Bible and praying helped him through his darkest hours. At this time, Simon is making his first steps in the outside world again. It seems like he is doing well.

Simon's story is typical of how crime and incarceration can shake one's meaning system. Simon experienced a major loss of meaning in life during his first months in prison, which was accompanied by high levels of distress. Feeling that his life was meaningless and that he had no positive future, he tried to commit suicide. In terms of Park's meaning-making model (2010), his appraised meaning (having stabbed his brother and being in prison) led to major loss of meaning. This loss of meaning was so obvious that Simon could not possibly cope by denial or by distorting his perception of the situation (assimilation). The only way to cope with this meaning breakdown was to search for new meaning and create a new meaning system (accommodation). In the beginning, however, Simon experienced only hopelessness. He needed the support of a therapist to experience that his life could still have value. Only then could he start searching for meaning by exploring his past and the antecedents of the crime and, therefore, search for the deeper meaning of his own life and of life in general. By the end of the therapy, which only took ten

sessions, Simon had made considerable progress on this journey.

Steger et al. (2006) defined the presence of meaning in life as the individual's perception that his or her life is significant, purposeful, and valuable (Steger et al., 2006). People experience meaning when they comprehend the world, when they understand their place into the world, and when they can identify what they want to accomplish in life (Steger et al., 2008). Simon came to comprehend his inner life more clearly and found new purpose in it: he had a clearer view of what caused him to commit the crime; he understood that it wasn't a coincidence he ended up in prison; he now experienced his life and himself as valuable; and he knew what to live for in the future. In a way, Simon's case also confirmed what studies have repeatedly shown, namely that higher levels of the presence of meaning in life are associated with positive well-being, lower levels of distress, and better health outcomes in the general population (Ryff, 2012; Steger, 2012; Wong, 2012).

The case of Simon illustrates and seems to confirm that not only victims but also perpetrators can experience a loss of meaning evoked by the crime and subsequent incarceration, that prisoners also search for meaning, and that they can experience new meanings as a result of this process. The question remains, however, whether Simon was just an exception. One way to answer this question is to examine the literature on meaning and posttraumatic growth among offenders and prisoners.

Meaning in Prison and Forensic Literature

In order to find literature addressing meaning, meaning-making and posttraumatic growth among prisoners and offenders, we systematically scrutinized a variety of databases, using a

broad range of keywords to identify relevant publications. We searched the database PsycInfo using "meaning," "existential," "spiritual", "posttraumatic growth," "prison," and all their related terms as keywords.[4] We found a total of 1858 references. After scanning the titles and abstracts of all the documents we found 43 studies relevant to our work. Titles like "the meaning of growth of the prisoner population," for example, were rejected. In the second phase, a broader range of databases was searched with *Limo*, the search engine of the KU Leuven. Limo covers a broad range of databases such as Criminal Justice Abstracts, International Bibliography of the Social Sciences, International Criminal Law, International Philosophical Bibliography, Intule (Arts & Humanities, Health & Life Sciences, Social Sciences), Medline, Philosophers Index, PubMed, Science Direct, Social Web, Sociological Abstracts, and Web of Knowledge, Web of Science. The same keywords were used as in the PsyInfo search, and 3381 references were found. Through title and abstract selection, only 59 studies were deemed relevant. After checking both queries for duplicate results and reading the abstracts more closely, 57 studies were pertinent. Another 36 articles were selected through a Google Scholar search. In the end, a total of 93 studies met our criteria.

Most of the articles were either studies of religious or spiritual coping with incarceration and spiritually-based therapy in prison or theoretical studies that addressed the importance of meaning in offender rehabilitation (e.g. the *Good Lives Model,* Ward &

4 The related terms of the keywords for the search in PsycInfo were: posttraumatic, growth, development, developments, ontogenetic, growth aspects, generalized growth, biological growth, prisoners, prisoner, prison inmate, prison inmate, jail inmate, inmates prison, prison, correctional facilities, correctional facility, correctional health facilities, correctional institution, correctional institutions, facilities correctional, facility, correctional, institution, institution, imprisonments, prosecution, existential, spiritual, spirituals, religion, religions, theology, religious affiliation.

Brown, 2004). Eventually, we discovered a handful of qualitative studies on posttraumatic growth, *world assumptions* of prisoners, and a single pilot study that reports some quantitative results about meaning among 30 French prisoners (Mandhouj, 2014).

Research Questions

Being confronted with this lack of quantitative studies, we were challenged to start from zero if we wanted to find answers to our basic question of how prisoners relate to meaning during their incarceration. Based on the meaning-making model (Park, 2010), on the concept of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), on the concepts of meaning and search for meaning (Steger et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2008), and on our clinical experience, we delineated six specific research questions:

1. Does incarceration lead to a loss of meaning, and is this accompanied with distress?
2. Which coping strategies predict posttraumatic growth during incarceration?
3. Is posttraumatic growth associated with less distress?
4. Are there different profiles of meaning and search for meaning among prisoners?
5. How are the experienced loss of meaning, ways of coping and new meanings (meanings made) connected on a content level?
6. How can meaning-making and posttraumatic growth be supported in therapy during incarceration?

The research questions reflect different stages of the meaning-making model (2010) (Figure 1). The first research question refers to the basic tenet of the meaning-making model, which argues that the threat to a meaning system leads to the experience of distress (Park, 2010).

The second research question refers to the meaning-making processes. Park (2010) distinguishes different meaning-making processes or coping strategies that either lead to assimilation of the appraised meaning – which wouldn't lead to an adjustment of the meaning system and certainly not to posttraumatic growth (Joseph, 2011) – or to accommodation, which would lead to new meaning and posttraumatic growth.

The third research question reflects the next stage in the meaning-making model; new meanings and posttraumatic growth would lead to less distress.

The fourth research question approaches meaning from a different angle. The meaning-making model assumes that people search for meaning when they are not experiencing it and that they find meaning when they search for it (Park, 2010). Other studies, however, have shown that this is not always the case (Steger et al., 2008). Alternative theoretical approaches suggest that people show important differences in how they relate to experiencing meaning and search for meaning. In fact, different profiles of meaning have been found in chronically ill patients (Dezutter et al., 2013), emerging adults (Dezutter et al., 2014), and older adults (Van der Heyden et al., 2015). We wondered if we also could distinguish different meaning profiles among offenders.

The fifth question connects the different stages of the meaning-making model as a whole. Because Park (2010) emphasizes the importance of the content of the new meanings

(meanings made), we were interested in the content of new meanings made by prisoners and how these new meanings connected with their initial prison experiences, their loss of meaning, and their coping strategies.

The final question brings us back to the clinical reality. How does the meaning-making process show itself in psychotherapy and how can we support posttraumatic growth among prisoners?

Study Design and Results

Depending on the particular research question, we chose different samples and different methodologies.[5] We started with a pilot-study of 30 sex offenders, which we recruited from FIDES ("Forensisch Initiatief voor Deviante Seksualiteit"), a post-prison treatment program for sexual offenders, with in- and out-patient programs in Belgium. This pilot study enabled us to test the reliability of the instruments we planned to use in the larger prison study, and we were interested in exploring how posttraumatic growth would be associated with distress in this sample (research question 3). We used a mixed-method design. A quantitative component focused on posttraumatic growth, distress and the duration of therapy, and a qualitative part focused on the content of the experienced growth, former prison experiences, and the on-going therapy. The results of this pilot study are to be found in Chapter 4 (*Posttraumatic Growth in Sex Offenders: A Pilot Study with a Mixed Method Design*).

A larger study was conducted in three Belgian prisons (Brugge, Ruislede, and Ieper) with 365 participants. A quantitative approach was used to answer three research questions: Does

5 Detailed descriptions of the samples, methodologies, operational definitions and statistical strategies are to be found in the following chapters.

a loss of meaning evoked by incarceration predict distress in prison (research question 1)? Which coping strategies predict posttraumatic growth during incarceration (research question 2)? And, are there distinguishable meaning-profiles among prisoners (research question 3)? Answers to these research questions are to be found in Chapter 2 (*Loss of Meaning as a Predictor of Distress in Prison*), Chapter 3 (*Coping Strategies and Search for Meaning as Predictors of Posttraumatic Growth in Prison*), and Chapter 5 (*Profiles of Meaning and Search for Meaning among Prisoners*).

Our third qualitative study focused on the content of new meanings made among prisoners and how these new meanings were connected with their initial prison experiences, their loss of meaning and their coping strategies (research question 5). The participants for this study were recruited from the participants in the larger quantitative study in Brugge prison. They were invited to participate in a study about their prison experiences and how this affected their meaning in life. In a semi-structured biographical interview, the participants were asked to reflect on their earliest prison experiences, how they coped with incarceration, and how their life evolved during their incarceration until the moment of the interview. The participants were also invited to reflect on their experience of meaning in life and their future. The results of this study are to be found in Chapter 6 (*Ten prisoners on a search for meaning: A qualitative study of loss and growth during incarceration*).

One case study was conducted to explore how the meaning-making process and posttraumatic growth could be supported during therapy (research question 6). The client was in therapy at the new mental health clinic in Brugge prison. The case study is to be found in Chapter 7 (*Posttraumatic Growth during Incarceration: A Case Study from an Experiential-Existential Perspective*).

The informed consent documents and the different studies were approved by the ethical commission of the KU Leuven (Belgium) and by the Belgian General Directory of prison institutions. On a practical level, all studies were supported by CCG Prisma (Centrum Geestelijke Gezondheidszorg), FIDES (Forensisch Initiatief voor Deviante Seksualiteit), JWW Ieper, PSD PLC Ruislede (the psychosocial services of the prison of Ruislede), and the different institutions of Brugge, Ieper and Ruilsede prisons.

Academic Research and the Reality of Prison

Conducting the research in prison was an adventure by itself. In particular, the quantitative study turned out to be quite an undertaking. We invited 490 Dutch-speaking prisoners to participate. In order to obtain maximum participation, we informed each prisoner in person about the purpose of the study, and we collected the completed questionnaires ourselves. This "field work" usually happened during lunchtime because most of the prisoners are in their cells at that time. If prisoners were absent, we returned to their cell the following day. Although this method proved to be effective, it was also very slow and labor-intensive. By the end, we had seen every corner of the medium- to high- security Brugge prison and viewed every one of its cells.

Most of the prisoners were very hospitable. When we asked to introduce ourselves and the study, most of them presented their own chair and asked if we would like to have a cup of coffee. The fact that the researcher came in person to explain the goal of the study and that they didn't have to hand the questionnaire to a guard increased their confidence in the study. As a result, the response rate was high (96.25%) and in the end the questionnaires

of 365 prisoners (85.84%) could be used in the study. Usually the prisoners were immediately willing to collaborate. To our surprise, they were interested in the study and pleased that we were interested in their experiences. For some prisoners, participating in the research was a welcome opportunity to share their prison experience with the outside world. Some of them spontaneously offered to collaborate in further studies on the subject or asked to be informed about the results of this particular study. Some prisoners felt the need to talk about the subject after completing the questionnaire. For them, the questionnaire was very confrontational. Some prisoners experienced completing the questionnaire as an eye-opener and an invitation to reflect on their purpose and meaning in life. Quite often prisoners had an intense need to vent about all kinds of things. A few took the opportunity to talk about their personal story. Interestingly, the research also became a topic of conversation among prisoners. After a while, they knew that a researcher would be coming visit them soon.

In just a few cases prisoners reacted with hostility and didn't even want to hear our explanation. They were very direct in their refusal, leaving no space for further conversation. There were no specific characteristics about this category – no differences in ethnic background, crime committed, or age compared to the welcoming prisoners.

In some sections, the guards asked us to close the door when exiting a cell. Although this made the work of the guard and the practical side of the research more efficient (the guard didn't have to return to close the door), it felt like an awkward thing to do. The experience of locking up a person – after talking with him or her for a couple of minutes – gave us unwanted power over the prisoner. In our experience, locking the door felt destructive to

our short but mutually constructive relationship. By accident, we got locked up two times with a prisoner ourselves. Although the prisoners didn't intend to harm us, the situation felt very unsafe.

The ease or unease of the fieldwork was primarily determined by the cooperation of the guards. Two guards, neither of whom had authority over the research, refused access to their prison section. We solved this problem by going back to that section when a different guard was on duty. Most of the guards were very accommodating in allowing us to go into the cells to talk with the prisoners. Others stood closely next to the cell door and listened to what we were talking about, which made the contact less spontaneous. Some guards were especially helpful in high-risk sections in identifying prisoners of whom to be cautious and to warn us not to enter some cells. We witnessed a couple of unpleasant incidents. Twice guards openly humiliated prisoners for no reason, commenting on their physical appearance or other features. The fact that these guards didn't refrain even when outsiders were present was particularly shocking. During the study period four prisoners committed suicide, which introduced a grim reality to our work.

Understandably, academic research in natural setting involves a lack of controllability of all the conditions and it challenges the researcher to respect the daily reality of the researched field. Flexibility in the use of the research design and creativity on the part of the researcher are vital. Hopefully, this doctoral study transforms the restraints of the fieldwork into a realistic, profound and beneficial understanding of meaning-related issues among prisoners.

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Chapter 2

Loss of Meaning as a Predictor of Distress in Prison

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Abstract

Incarceration has been described as a distressing experience, marked by important losses and accompanied by deep existential crises. Some prisoners hit the bottom and are confronted with the fact that their life doesn't make sense any more. Surprisingly, the loss of meaning among prisoners hasn't been studied in a quantitative way before. In this study, we explored the relationship between the loss of meaning inflicted by incarceration and distress. In a sample of 365 prisoners, univariate analyses and hierarchical multiple regression analyses confirmed that a loss of meaning positively predicted distress in prison. Differences between prison regimes predicted distress, but had no influence on the loss of meaning. Un-sentenced incarceration, on the other hand, did not have a direct relationship with distress, but amplified the effect of loss on meaning on distress. Psychotherapy and chaplain support did not affect the relationship between loss of meaning and distress during incarceration.

6 Vanhooren, S., Leijssen, M., & Dezutter, J. (Under Review). Loss of Meaning as a Predictor of Distress in Prison. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology.*

Introduction

Incarceration tends to affect prisoners in very different ways. Qualitative studies have compiled a rich but sad collection of how incarceration can burden human life (e.g. Liebling & Maruna, 2011). In the worst case, imprisonment can have detrimental effects on one's financial and material means, personal and intimate relationships, agency, identity, self-worth, and on one's experience of meaning in life (Haney, 2003; Haney & Harner & Riley, 2013; Harvey, 2011; Irwin & Owen, 2011, Maruna et al., 2006; Sinha, 2010). For some prisoners, incarceration leads to a deep existential crisis which is accompanied by a loss of meaning and distress (Maruna et al., 2006; Vanhooren et al., 2015; Van Ginneken, 2014).

In the general population, losses of meaning have been described as the result of the confrontation with unusual circumstances (Park, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Common experiences do not challenge our sense of meaning or purposes in life, because they don't contradict our basic understandings of who we are and how the world functions (Park, 2010). It is only when life does not meet our general expectations that our sense of meaning comes under pressure. As a consequence, the experience of unexpected life events can threaten our sense of meaning and can eventually lead to a loss of meaning. This loss of meaning, argues Park (2010), is accompanied by distress.

In the literature, the loss of meaning and its consequences has been studied in victims of life-threatening illnesses (Milam, 2006; Park 2013; Silver & Updegraff, 2013; Stanton et al., 2006), victims of sexual assault and domestic violence (de Castella & Simmonds, 2012; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), and in victims of war, terrorist attacks and natural disasters (Rosner & Poswell,

2006; Silver & Updegraff, 2013). Although the emphasis in these empirical studies is mainly on victims, Janoff-Bulman (2013) argued that violating one's own moral standards can be shocking as well. In this way, being incarcerated as a consequence of one's own actions, can lead to a loss of meaning. As Jamieson and Grounds (2011) suggest, this theory of the 'disruption of the assumptive world' (p. 59) and the loss of meaning could shed a revealing light on one of the possible causes of distress during incarceration.

Does Imprisonment Provoke a Loss of Meaning?

In general, *meaning in life* has been defined as the individuals' perception of his or her life being significant, purposeful and valuable (Steger et al., 2006). People experience meaning when they comprehend the world, when they understand their place in the world and when they can identify what they want to accomplish in life (Steger et al., 2008). Consequently, a loss of meaning can be experienced when a person experiences a loss of significance or value in his or her life, and a loss of purpose in life (Park, 2010). A loss of meaning could also be caused by a loss of comprehension of one's self, of others and of the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2013). Losses of meaning have been described as a consequence of disruptive life events (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). The question is whether incarceration and crime also can lead to a loss of meaning.

Recent qualitative studies have highlighted the occurrence of a loss of meaning evoked by the experience of incarceration and an increasing awareness of having committed a crime. In one study conducted by Maruna and his colleagues (2006), 75 prisoners described how incarceration led to a loss of meaning.

They experienced incarceration as 'hitting the bottom', and once in prison, they felt shocked by what they had done. The experience of imprisonment led to a period of deep existential questioning, which was magnified by the fact that there was so much time to reflect in prison. Participants in this study described how they experienced a dramatic loss of meaning in their life, a loss of comprehension of their own reactions and thoughts, and a loss of purpose in life. In a recent study, Van Ginneken (2014) interviewed six first-time female prisoners and used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to interpret their prison experiences. Prisoners in the study gave examples of how incarceration had challenged their general sense of meaning. Furthermore, they also experienced a loss of comprehension and expectations to the world in various ways. For example, there was a loss of the expectation that others would be helpful (e.g., not feeling supported during the entry stage of imprisonment), the loss of a predictive world (e.g. the unfamiliarity with the prison institute), and a loss of the belief in a just world (e.g., they didn't feel they were fairly treated by the justice system and prison itself). The prisoners also experienced a loss of purpose in life (e.g. not being able to take care of the children anymore). For these prisoners, the experience of the loss of meaning was accompanied by symptoms of depression or rebellious behavior.

A study by Braswell and Wells (2014) described prisoners' feelings of absurdity and emptiness as a consequence of loss of meaning. Young prisoners in a study conducted by Harvey (2011) explained how that they felt disconnected from their own life during the entry stage of incarceration and that their life lost meaning. In another study with a mixed-method design with 30 sex offenders, the participants experienced imprisonment as a distressing period in which they questioned their very existence

(Vanhooren et al., 2015). Jamison and Grounds (2011) interviewed 19 wrongly convicted prisoners. Most of them (14) experienced a loss of purpose in life as a reaction to their situation.

Confronted with this loss of meaning, some prisoners search for solutions by going into psychotherapy (Braswell & Wells, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Van Ginneken, 2014) or by seeking religious support (Maruna et al., 2006). There is evidence that prisoners attend religious, spiritual and humanistic practices much more than they did before they got incarcerated (O'Connor & Duncan, 2011). Religion and spirituality are often described as important coping strategies in dealing with prison distress (e.g., Mandhouj et al., 2014; Nedderman et al., 2010; Maschi et al., 2014; Schneider & Feltey, 2009). Qualitative and theoretical studies describe psychotherapy as an important way for prisoners to process their losses evoked by incarceration and to find new ways to experience meaning in life (e.g., Braswell & Wells, 2014; Ferrito et al., 2012; Gee et al., 2011; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Worthington et al, 2011).

Although results of qualitative studies are not fit to make generalizations towards the entire prison population, these studies suggest at least four things. First, some prisoners experience a loss of meaning during incarceration. Second, some prisoners are capable of verbalizing their loss of meaning in life and reflecting on this loss. Third, some prisoners seek support through psychotherapy and religion to cope with their loss of meaning. And finally, the loss of meaning among these prisoners is accompanied by a certain level of distress.

Loss of Meaning evokes Distress

In an overview of quantitative studies on meaning and mental health outcomes in the general population, Steger (2012) argued that there is a strong evidence for the relationship between lower levels of meaning in life and distress. Park (2010) hypothesized that it is the experience of the endangered meanings which elicits the distress that accompanies disruptive life events. Or, in other words, distress is the result of the experienced incongruence between former meanings and purposes in life and the actual meanings that are experienced during the situation itself after, for example, committing an impulsive act of violence. As suggested by the qualitative studies, incarceration can create a dissonance between one's former meanings and purposes in life and one's actual experience of meaning in prison (Maruna et al., 2006; van Ginneken, 2014; Vanhooren et al., 2015). Striking examples of this experience of dissonance are to be found in the study of Maruna et al. (2006). Prisoners in this study describe how they couldn't identify themselves anymore with the person they used to be before the crime and incarceration. They experienced themselves and their lives as very different, and this was accompanied by feelings of distress. It is the experience of this dissonance that creates a deep existential crisis and elicits the distress, because the former meanings and identities do not make sense any more (Park, 2010). In the context of incarceration, this could mean that prison distress could be explained by the threat of losing one's meaning and purposes in life.

It is important to note though that incarceration and crime can only threaten one's meaning or lead to a loss of meaning if the circumstances in prison contradict one's former meanings. People who do not have a purpose in life cannot lose it because

of committing a crime or incarceration. Maruna (2001) found important differences between how prisoners experienced in meaning in life. In his qualitative study with 50 ex-prisoners, Maruna discovered that half of the participants experienced what he called "empty and self-centered" meaning whereas the meaning in life of the other half was marked by the wish and need to accomplish self-transcending purposes. Whether incarceration triggers a loss of meaning and distress might depend on the individuals' outside world experience. It is even possible that prisoners experience more meaning in life once they are imprisoned. The degree to which one experiences distress during incarceration might also be influenced by other factors such as individual and institutional characteristics (cf. infra).

Distress in Prison

Research has shown that individual and institutional differences can reduce or amplify the experience of distress during incarceration (Day et al., 2012; Liebling & Maruna, 2011). Based on their research, Liebling et al. (2011) concluded that whereas a majority of the prisoners appeared to suffer in one way or another from *entry shock* into prison. Prisoners who *import vulnerability* (i.e., prisoners with traumatic experiences prior to incarceration) would be more sensitive to prison distress during the entry stage. However, Pham and Saloppé (2013) argued that prisoners with a narcissistic, anti-social or psychopathic personality disorder would be less prone to prison distress due to their emotional detachment from others and from situations in general. Liebling et al. (2011) also discovered differences between un-sentenced versus sentenced prisoners,

and first-time prisoners versus "experienced" prisoners. Unsentenced prisoners show considerably higher levels of distress than sentenced prisoners, and first-time prisoners also showed higher levels of distress than experienced prisoners (Liebling et al., 2011).

The level of experienced distress would not only seem to vary between prisoners, but also between correctional institutions. This was evident in the Liebling et al. (2011) study which found that 'prison quality' explained up to 30% of the variance in prisoner distress. The variance was explained by factors such as the availability of educational programs, the degree of allowed contact with the family, and the regime of the prison (open versus closed). Day et al. (2012) also reported differences in social climates between two Australian prisons, one providing a therapeutic climate while the other provided a mainstream service. Prisoners and staff perceived the therapeutic climate prison as more supportive and safer, although the difference with the mainstream prison was less pronounced than expected.

In general, the level of distress in prison would be higher compared to the outside world. In their study on prison suicide, Liebling et al. (2011) measured the level of distress experienced by prisoners across twelve English prisons. They randomly selected 100 inmates in each prison. The participants (n = 1204) completed the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) – a measure of mental distress – at two different times (Liebling et al., 2011). One of the authors' conclusions was that the overall level of distress was extraordinarily high. In eleven of the twelve prison institutes, the mean score was above the threshold level that has been used to indicate pathogenic distress (Liebling et al., 2011). These findings have been replicated by Sinha (2010) in India. In this study with a smaller sample (n = 37) the general

level of the GHQ-12 also exceeded the threshold level. Another study with 52 prisoners in Luxembourg confirmed higher scores on the GHQ-12, compared with the non-prisoner population (Baumann et al., 2008).

Aim of the Study

The idea that a loss of meaning could play an important role in the experience of prison as a distressing situation has been under-studied. One of the merits of the mentioned qualitative studies was highlighting a possible relationship between imprisonment, the loss of meaning, and psychological distress. Our goal is to explore the relationship between the loss of meaning caused by incarceration and distress in a quantitative way. Based on the theories of Janoff-Bulman (1992, 2012) and Park (2010), we can define the loss of meaning by incarceration as the experienced difference between meaning in life before incarceration and the actual meaning in life during incarceration. We expect that this loss of meaning will positively predict the amount of experienced distress in prison. Furthermore, based on studies regarding the effect of incarceration (Day et al., 2012; Liebling & Maruna, 2011), we expect that the difference in prison climate (e.g. closed regime prison with higher security versus open regime prison with low security) and the difference between *un-sentenced* versus *sentenced* incarceration will predict the amount of distress. We expect that differences in prison climate and the difference between un-sentenced versus sentenced incarceration will influence the relation between the experienced loss of meaning and distress. We also expect that therapy attendance and chaplain support will moderate the relationship between loss of meaning and prison stress.

Methods

Participants

A cross-sectional study with a final sample of 365 prisoners was performed at three prisons in Belgium. The prison in Brugge (PCB) is a closed regime prison with a medium to high risk population. The prison contains a separate block for non-convicted prisoners and a separate block for female prisoners. The small prison of Ieper holds high to medium risk prisoners. The prison of Ruislede (PLC) has an open regime and contains only low to medium risk convicted male prisoners.

All Dutch-speaking prisoners who were available at the moment of the research were invited to participate. The first author had a brief contact with each prisoner in order to explain the purpose of the study. Prisoners who were willing to participate signed an informed consent document. In the prison of Brugge, prisoners completed the questionnaire in their cells. In the prisons of Ieper and Ruislede, the questionnaires were also individually completed, but in a separate office. This difference was due to specific organizational circumstances in the institutions. To protect the privacy of the prisoners, the first author personally collected the completed questionnaire in an anonymous sealed envelope. In this way, the information was not shared with the prison staff and maximum confidentiality was guaranteed. The informed consent document and the study itself were approved by the ethical commission of the University of Leuven (Belgium) and by the Belgian General Directory of prison institutions.

Over the three prison institutions, 490 Dutch-speaking prisoners who were available were invited to participate. The

informed consent document was signed by 427 prisoners; 411 handed the sealed envelope to the researcher (response rate: 96.25%). Reasons for non-participating were: 'upcoming transfer to another prison' (0.47%), 'too busy' (0.70%), 'not interested' (1.41%), 'being sick' (0.47%), 'no time' (0.23%), 'feeling lazy' (0.23%), 'not interested' (0.23%), and 'too difficult'(0.23%). The returned envelopes contained 46 blank (or almost blank) questionnaires, which were omitted from the study. In the end, the questionnaires of 365 prisoners (85.84%) were used in this study. More detailed information about the participation of prisoners across the three prisons can be found in Table 1. The study was conducted from March 2014 until July 2014.

Table 1

Participation across the Three Prison Institutions

	Available prisoners	Signed Informed consents	Returned envelopes	Final sample without blanc returns
Brugge (PCB)	421 (85.92%)	366 (85.71%)	350 (85.15%)	304 (83.29%)
Ruislede (PLC)	46 (09.39%)	41 (09.60%)	41 (09.98%)	41 (11.23%)
Ieper	23 (04.69%)	20 (04.96%)	20 (04.87%)	20 (05.48%)
Total	490 (100%)	427 (100%)	411(100%)	365 (100%)

Demographic information about the ratio of male and female prisoners, age, educational level based on the highest diploma, and religious background are to be found in Table 2. Prison-related information (sentenced versus un-sentenced prisoners, times being imprisoned, the actual time spent in prison during this incarceration, and the kind of committed crimes) are to be found in Table 3. Information concerning the experience of being a victim of violence is also to be found in Table 3, as is

the rate of psychotherapy attendance and chaplain support during incarceration. Regarding the experienced violence during childhood, 'sexually abused' means sexual abuse with or without other forms of violence. 'Physical violence' means physical violence without sexual violence, but maybe combined with other forms of violence. 'Witnessing violence at home' means witnessing without experiencing sexual or physical violence, and 'bullied at school' means being bullied at school without other forms of violence.

Table 2

Demographic Information

	M	SD	%	Cumulative %
Female			14.50%	14.50%
Male			85.50%	100.00%
Age	40.01	12.42		
Education				
Primary			27.70%	27.70%
Secundary			58.20%	85.90%
Bachelor			08.30%	94.20%
University			05.80%	100.00%
Religion				
Christian			63.10%	63.10%
Muslim			07.00%	70.10%
Buddhist			01.40%	71.50%
Jewish			00.60%	72.10%
Atheist			08.20%	80.30%
Other			19.70%	100.00%

Table 3

Information about Prison-variables, experienced Violence during Childhood, Therapy Attendance and Contact with Chaplain.

	M	SD	%	Cumulative %
Un-sentenced			18.60%	18.60%
Sentenced			81.40%	100.00%
Times being imprisoned	2.57	1.46		
Months incarcerated this time	38.54	38.14		
Drug-related offences			34.30%	34.30%
Murder			15.10%	49.40%
Other personal violence			13.10%	62.50%
Sexual delinquency			11.40%	73.90%
Fraud			07.00%	80.90%
Burglary			04.20%	85.10%
Theft and robbery			03.90%	89.00%
Arson			02.80%	91.80%
Other			08.20%	100.00%
Not a victim during childhood			46.30%	46.30%
Victim of sexual abuse			16.30%	62.60%
Victim of physical abuse			17.10%	79.70%
Witness of violence at home			13.10%	92.80%
Bullied at school			07.20%	100.00%
In therapy during incarceration			19.70%	19.70%
Not in therapy			80.30%	100.00%
Contact with chaplain			44.20%	44.20%
No contact with chaplain			55.80%	100.00%

Measures

The *General Health Questionnaire – 12 (GHQ-12).* The General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12; Goldberg & Williams, 1988) is a widely used scale to screen mental illness and to identify potential cases, which later can be verified by a psychiatric interview and other specific measures. The GHQ-12 assesses psychiatric symptoms experienced over the preceding four weeks, but is not a tool for indicating a specific diagnosis. It is also widely used to measure distress and current mental health in different settings and cultures (e.g. Fryer et al., 2004; Montazeri et al., 2003). The GHQ-12 is also a valid measure of experienced distress in prison (Baumann et al., 2008; Hassan et al., 2011; Liebling et al., 2011; Sinha, 2010). The GHQ-12 consists of twelve items that are scored on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from *not at all* to *much more than usual*. Examples of items are: "Have you recently felt constantly under strain," and "Have you recently lost much sleep over worry." Half of the items are positively worded and the remaining six items are negatively worded questions, with item response wording reversed for the two types of questions (i.e., positively worded questions run from *more so than usual* to *not at all*; negatively worded run from *not at all* to *much more than usual*). There are two recommended methods for scoring the GHQ-12. The first scoring type is the binary method (0-0-1-1) where possible scores range from 0 to 12. The second method is Likert-type scoring (0-1-2-3) where scores range from 0 to 36. The binary scoring type is preferred over the Likert-type scoring when the GHQ-12 is used to asses "casesness". The Likert-type method is often used in research settings because this scoring method produces a more acceptable distribution of scores for statistical analysis (Goldberg & Williams, 1988). In our

study we used the binary method to determine whether the total scores of the participants met the cut-off value which is used for the Belgian population (4+) (Fryers et al, 2004). Furthermore, we used the Likert-type method for the statistical analyses. The internal consistency of the GHQ-12 ranges from .77 to .93, depending on the study (Goldberg & Williams, 1988). In our study the Cronbach's alpha was .83.

Loss of Meaning in Prison. Since there was no existing questionnaire that measures the loss of meaning as a result of the difference between former global meaning and appraised meaning, we constructed a new scale. Based on the theories of Steger (2012), Park (2010) and the Meaning in Life Questionaire (Steger et al., 2006), we created three items that would assess the presence of meaning in life ("My life has meaning"; "I have purpose in life", "My life makes sense"). Each item corresponds with what are known today as important facets of meaning: comprehension of one's life on one hand, and having a purpose in life on the other hand (Steger, 2006). The items are very similar to the items used in validated measures of meaning, such as the Meaning of Life Questionnaire (MLQ, Steger, 2006) and the Purpose in Life Test (PIL, Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1969) which have widely been used in a variety of studies (Wong, 2012). Each item in our new measure was scored on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*totally not true*) to 5 (*totally true*). Cronbach's alpha of the scale was satisfactory (.91).

In order that we could calculate loss of meaning, the prisoners were asked to complete these three items twice. To assess the sense of meaning prior to incarceration, the items were first formulated in the past tense, referring to the period before incarceration (e.g., "My life made sense"). This first version was introduced by the sentence: "These questions are

about your experiences in life before you arrived in prison. Try to remember how you would have answered these questions at that time. Please answer according to the scale below."

To assess the actual sense of meaning, the prisoners had to score the items a second time, now formulated in the present tense. This time, the questions referred to their actual prison experience (e.g., "My life makes sense"). The introductory sentence was: "Here are the same questions, but this time they refer to your experiences here in prison. Please answer according to the scale below."

The loss of meaning was calculated by the difference between the scores on meaning prior to incarceration and the scores on the actual experience of meaning.

Demographic information was obtained through the self-reported questionnaire regarding gender, age, level of education, religious background, number of times incarcerated, time spent in prison this time, prison institute, kind of committed crime, and traumatic experiences in childhood. Participants were also asked whether they were in therapy and whether they were supported by a chaplain at the moment.

Analytical Strategy

All analyses are performed in SPSS 22.0 (IBM Corp., 2013). First, Pearson correlations were calculated between demographical variables (age, educational level), prison variables (number of times being imprisoned and the amount of time spent in prison during this incarceration) and our study variables (distress and loss of meaning). Partial correlations were performed to search for in between group differences regarding gender and prison regimes. Univariate analyses were

performed on gender, therapy attendance, chaplain support, prison institutes, un-sentenced versus sentenced prisoners with regard to mean differences on distress and loss of meaning. Four hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to determine the relative importance of the loss of meaning, prison regime, un-sentenced versus sentenced prisoners, therapy attendance, and interaction effects.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Correlations are presented in Table 4. The educational level, the number of times being imprisoned, and the actual time spent in prison (during this incarceration), were significantly related with age. With regard to our study variables, the actual time spent in prison was negatively related with distress. Age was positively related with loss of meaning, whereas the number of times being imprisoned was negatively related with loss of meaning. Furthermore, loss of meaning and distress during incarceration had a significant positive relationship. Partial correlations did not show any virtual gender differences or differences between prisons regarding loss of meaning, distress and the other variables (age, educational level, actual time and times spent in prison).

Table 4

Correlations between the Study-variables, Age, Educational Level, Times and Time Spent in Prison.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.
1. Age	1					
2. Educational Level	.19***	1				
3. Times in Prison	-.16**	- .14*	1			
4. Time spent in Prison	.25***	- .04	- .07	1		
5. Distress	.03	.10	.01	- .12*	1	
6. Loss of Meaning	.13*	.06	- .14*	- .09	.38***	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$ (2-tailed).

Listwise N=342

Mean-level analyses of distress showed significant differences ($F(1, 362) = 26.50$, $p < .001$ partial ή² = .07), between inmates who were imprisoned in an open regime prison (PLC Ruislede) ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 0.55$) compared with inmates who were imprisoned in closed regime prisons (PCB Brugge and Ieper) ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 0.61$) with the latter showing higher levels of distress. However, using the binary GHQ-12 scoring method only for this purpose, we found that the general mean level of distress in our sample ($M = 5.31$, $SD = 2.31$) was above the threshold level of the Begian population (4+). All prisons, even the open regime prison of Ruislede ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 2.67$) met this threshold level. Un-sentenced prisoners reported higher levels of distress ($M = 2.98$, $SD = 0.67$) than those who were already convicted ($M = 2.75$, $SD = 0.61$) ($F(1, 362) = 07.32$, $p < .001$, partial ή² = .02). Furthermore, prisoners who attended psychotherapy during their incarceration

showed lower levels of distress (M = 2.65, SD = 0.68) than those who did not (M = 2.83, SD = 0.61) ($F(1, 362) = 4.79$, $p < .05$, partial ή² = .01). However, the significant mean-level difference between prisoners who attended psychotherapy and those who did not, disappeared when these mean-levels were controlled for the effect of differences between prisons (F (1, 363) = 2.65, *ns*). There were no significant differences regarding distress between prisoners who received support from a chaplain and those who didn't ($F(1, 361) = 0.10$, *ns*). No significant differences were found between male and female prisoners ($F(1,362) = 0.26$, *ns*). Likewise, there were no significant differences between prisoners who had been sexually abused, physically violated, bullied, who witnessed violence at home, and those who didn't experience any of these types of violence during childhood, regarding distress ($F(4, 344)$= 2.25, *ns*).

The general mean level of loss of meaning in our sample (M = .55, SD = 1.68) showed a slightly positive mean. The distribution shows us that there are also prisoners who scored a negative loss of meaning, which is in fact an increase of meaning. Mean levels analyses of loss of meaning showed no significant differences between inmates who were imprisoned in a closed or an open regime prison ($F(1,363) = 3.44$, *ns*). On the other hand, un-sentenced prisoners reported higher levels of loss of meaning (M = 1.08, SD = 1.76) compared to sentenced prisoners (M = 0.43, SD = 1.64) ($F(1, 363) = 08.35$, $p < .01$, partial ή² = .02). No significant differences were found between prisoners who attended psychotherapy during their incarceration and those who did not ($F(1,363) = 2.13$, *ns*), nor between prisoners who received support by a chaplain and those who did not ($F(1, 362) = 0.04$, *ns*). There were also no significant differences between male and female prisoners ($F(1, 363) = 0.13$, *ns*) nor between prisoners who had

been sexually abused, physically violated, bullied, who witnessed violence at home, and those who didn't experience any of these types of violence during childhood, regarding loss of meaning ($F(4, 345) = 1.50$, *ns*).

Primary Analyses

Age and educational level were entered as control variables given their association with the study variables shown in the correlational analyses. Number of times being imprisoned and the actual time spent in prison were entered as prison-related variables. These prison-related variables are shown to be associated with our study variables and are taken into account in the prediction of distress. Prison regime, un-sentenced versus sentenced prisoners, and psychotherapy were entered as moderators, because these variables showed significant mean-differences in regard to our study-variables.

Predictors were centered, and dummy coded variables were computed for prison regime and un-sentenced versus sentenced prisoners. In order to determine the relative importance of the differences between the prison regimes, loss of meaning and the interaction between both in predicting distress, a first set of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed. Table 5 presents the regression coefficients.

Table 5

Hierarchical Regression with Interaction Loss of Meaning and Prison Regime

Predictor	β Step 1	β Step 2	β Step 3	β Step 4
Age	.01	.05	-.00	.00
Educational level	.09	.08	.08	.08
Number of times in prison		.02	.10	.11*
Time spent in prison		- .13 *	- .10	- .10
Loss of meaning			.35 ***	.33 ***
Prison regime			- .25 ***	- .22 ***
Loss of meaning and prison regime				.08
Δ R^2	.01	.02	.19 ***	.01

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

Age and educational level were entered as control variables in Step 1. These control variables did not predict distress, R^2 = .01, $F(2, 339) = 1.58$, *ns*. Number of times being imprisoned and the actual time spent in prison (during this incarceration) were entered as prison-related variables in Step 2. These prison-related variables were also found not to be significant predictors of distress, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(2, 337) = 2.85$, *n*s. In Step 3, we entered the loss of meaning and the prison regime. Both variables significantly predicted distress, $\Delta R^2 = .19$, $F(2, 335) = 41.18$, $p < .001$, after controlling for gender, age, educational level and prison-related variables. Distress was positively predicted by loss of meaning, ($\beta = .35$, $p < .001$), and negatively predicted by prison regime, meaning that an open regime negatively predicts distress ($\beta = -.25$, $p < .001$). In order to investigate if the interaction between prison regime and loss of meaning added significantly to the prediction of distress after controlling for loss of meaning and prison regime, we entered the interaction in Step

4. The interaction between loss of meaning and prison regime (β = .08, *ns*) did not predict distress after controlling for the socio-demographic variables of gender, age and education, the prison-related variables and the loss of meaning and prison regime, ΔR^2 = .01, $F(1, 334) = 2.47$, *ns*).

A second set of hierarchical multiple regression analyses was performed in order to determine the relative importance of being un-sentenced, loss of meaning and the interaction between loss of meaning and un-sentenced in the prediction of distress. Table 6 presents the regression coefficients. Age and educational level were entered again as control variables in Step 1. Number of times being imprisoned and the actual time spent in prison (during this incarceration) were also again entered as prison-related variables in Step 2. In Step 3, we entered the loss of meaning and un-sentenced versus sentenced incarceration. Loss of meaning and un-sentenced versus sentenced incarceration significantly predicted distress, ΔR^2 = .14, $F(2, 335) = 27.91$, $p < .001$, after controlling the demographic and prison-related variables. Distress was positively predicted by loss of meaning ($\beta = .37$, $p < .001$), but not by un-sentenced versus sentenced incarceration. In order to investigate if the interaction between loss of meaning and un-sentenced versus sentenced added significantly to the prediction of distress, we entered the interaction in Step 4. The interaction between loss of meaning and (un-) sentenced incarceration ($\beta = .15$, $p < .05$) positively predicted distress after controlling for the socio-demographic variables of gender, age and education, the prison-related variables and the loss of meaning and un-sentenced versus sentenced, $\Delta R^2 = .02$, $F(1, 334) = 6.11$, $p < .05$. Figure 1 illustrates how higher levels of loss of meaning are associated with more distress in the case of un-sentenced prisoners compared to their counterparts.

Table 6

Hierarchical Regression with Interaction Loss of Meaning and Un-Sentenced Incarceration

Predictor	β Step 1	β Step 2	β Step 3	β Step 4
Age	.01	.05	.00	.00
Educational level	.10	.08	.09	.10
Number of times in prison		.02	.08	.08
Time spent in prison		- .13 *	- .06	- .06
Loss of Meaning			.37 ***	.30 ***
Un-sentenced			.08	.04
Loss of meaning and un-sentenced				.15 *
Δ R^2	.01	.02	.14 ***	.02 *

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

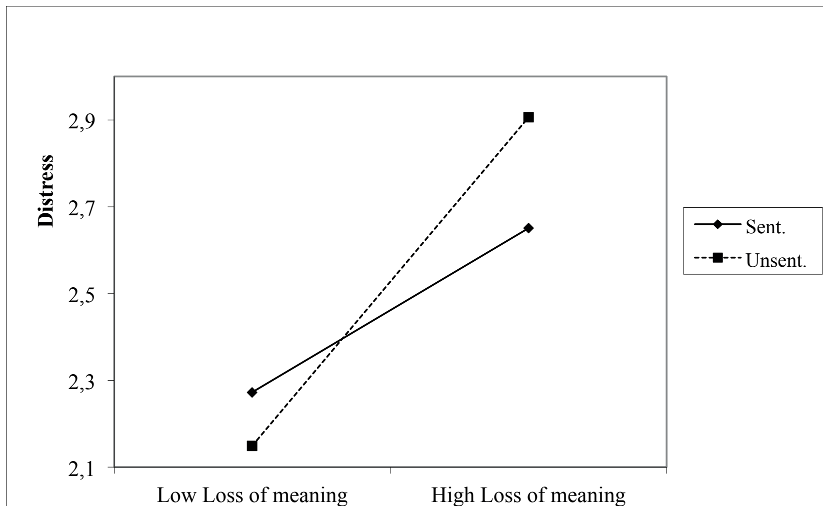

Figure 1

Interaction Loss of Meaning, Un-sentenced and Sentenced prisoners

In a last set of hierarchical multiple regression analyses, psychotherapy attendance was entered as a moderating variable, with Step 1 and Step 2 performed similar to the previous analyses (Table 7). In Step 3, loss of meaning and psychotherapy attendance significantly predicted distress, $\Delta R^2 = .14$, $F(2, 335) = 27.38$, $p < .001$, after controlling for age, educational level and prison-related variables. Distress was positively predicted by loss of meaning ($\beta = .37$, $p < .001$), but not by psychotherapy attendance. In the final step, the interaction between loss of meaning and psychotherapy attendance did not predict distress after controlling for the socio-demographic variables of gender, age and education, the prison-related variables and the loss of meaning and psychotherapy attendance, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $F(1, 334) = .30$, *ns*).

Table 7

Hierarchical Regression with Interaction Loss of Meaning and Psychotherapy

Predictor	β Step 1	β Step 2	β Step 3	β Step 4
Age	.01	.05	- .00	- .00
Educational level	.10	.08	.08	.07
Number of times in prison		.02	.06	.06
Time spent in prison		- .13 *	- .07	- .07
Loss of Meaning			.37 ***	.39 ***
Psychotherapy			- .05	- .05
Loss of meaning and psychotherapy				- .03
ΔR^2	.01	.02	.14 ***	.00

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

Discussion

We conducted a cross-sectional study of 365 prisoners focusing on the relationship between a possible loss of meaning caused by incarceration and distress. As expected, we found that loss of meaning positively predicted distress. Prison regime also turned out to be a predictor of distress. We also discovered, on one hand, that the relationship between the loss of meaning and prison stress is moderated by un-sentenced incarceration. Prison regime and psychotherapy, on the other hand, didn't influence the relationship between loss or meaning and distress.

The central focus of this study was the idea that incarceration could threaten the experience of meaning of these prisoners and that this experience would evoke distress. Considering that our constructed scale is not validated, and that we have to be cautious in drawing interpretations and conclusions, we found that the experienced loss of meaning (as measured in our study) indeed predicted distress. Qualitative studies have already suggested that incarceration is experienced by a number of prisoners as an existential challenge and that this challenge is accompanied by a deep personal crisis (e.g., Braswell & Wells, 2014; Crawley & Sparks, 2011; Jewkes, 2011, Maruna et al., 2006; Vanhooren et al., 2015; van Ginneken, 2014). Our findings confirmed these qualitative studies and, furthermore, are in line with research on meaning in life and meaning-making processes in the general population. The fact that loss of meaning predicts distress confirms Parks' (2010) argument that the experience of threatened global meanings causes distress. Lower levels of meaning in life have also been consistently associated with higher levels of psychological distress in the general population (Steger, 2012).

We found significant differences in distress between prison regimes. First, our study confirmed that the amount of distress among prisoners is very high compared to the general population. The mean level of distress in our study was above the threshold level. This is in line with the previous studies of Liebling et al. (2011), Sinha (2010) and Baumann et al. (2008) on distress during incarceration. Moreover, we found important differences among the prison institutions. The prison of Ruislede, which is an open-regime prison with a maximum capacity of 60 prisoners, has a more personal and therapeutic approach with its prisoners compared to Ieper and Brugge. This prison showed significantly lower levels of distress compared with the closed-regime prisons of Brugge and Ieper. The differences between the prison regimes turned out to be a predictor of distress in our study. The prison of Ruislede differs in multiple ways from the other two prisons. It contains a much smaller population compared to the prisons of Ieper en Brugge. The prisoners of Ruislede are low to medium risk prisoners, whereas the prisons of Ieper en Brugge contain medium to high risk prisoners. Ruislede also invests more in rehabilitation programs compared to Ieper and Brugge, including a staff that invests in personal relationships with the prisoners. It has an open regime; Brugge and Ieper have a closed regime. Because there are many differences between Ruislede and the prisons of Ieper and Brugge, it is hard to extrapolate which factor(s) caused this effect (therapeutic climate, seize, open regime versus closed regime, low – medium risk versus medium – high risk prisoners, personal relationship versus maintaining a more distant relationship). All these factors are known to have an important effect on the prison climate and on the level of distress (Day et al., 2012; Liebling et al., 2011).

Contrary to our expectations, the difference between prison regimes did not show significantly different levels of loss of meaning, nor did it interact with the loss of meaning and distress. Based on qualitative prison studies (e.g., Liebling & Maruna, 2011) and arguments of existential scholars about meaning (Leijssen, 2013; van Deurzen, 2012) we expected that the loss of material comfort, the loss of relational well-being, and the loss of personal autonomy would affect one's loss of meaning in a considerable way. In the open regime prison of Ruislede for example, one's physical freedom and personal autonomy are less restricted than in the closed regime prisons of Brugge and Ieper, and the social interaction between prisoners and prison staff is more personal. These differences could be responsible for the fact that the prisoners in Ruislede experience less distress. But if our measure of loss of meaning is valid, the quality of the prison does not make a difference in how prisoners experience their meaning in life. This would also mean that prison regime does not make a difference to whether one experiences a loss of meaning inflicted by incarceration, nor does it influence the effect of loss of meaning on distress.

In line with earlier studies (e.g., Liebling et al., 2011), we found that un-sentenced prisoners showed higher levels of distress than sentenced prisoners. We also found that un-sentenced prisoners experienced more loss of meaning than their sentenced counterparts. From a clinical point of view, this makes sense in many ways. First, un-sentenced prisoners are on average 'newer' in prison compared with sentenced prisoners. This means that they are closer in time with the initial entry shock, which has been associated with higher levels of distress (Liebling & Maruna, 2011). It also means that they have had less time to search and find new meanings in life. Research in the

general population has shown that it takes a certain amount of time before people experience 'posttraumatic growth' or acquire a new set of meanings (Helgeson et al., 2006). The fact that un-sentenced prisoners are still waiting for their trial means also that their future is very unpredictable and that they are in a luminal state, which makes it harder to rebuild one's world. Interestingly, being an un-sentenced prisoner did not predict distress in our study. Being un-sentenced only had an influence on distress as a moderator, amplifying the effect of the loss of meaning on distress (see Figure 1).

Psychotherapy attendance did not have an effect on the experience of loss of meaning. This makes sense of course, because therapy cannot prevent the experience of loss of meaning in life. Therapy only helps clients find new ways to deal with these losses and eventually to find new meanings (Gee et al., 2011). Future studies could explore whether and how therapy might support posttraumatic growth – which is the occurrence of fundamental shifts in one's meaning system and a different relationship towards one's self and others (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) – during incarceration.

In our study, loss of meaning was positively associated with the age of prisoners, and negatively associated with the number of times being incarcerated. The association between age and loss of meaning is interesting, but since we can't compare with similar studies, the interpretation of this result is only built on our clinical experience in working with prisoners. In our experience, older prisoners seem to be more aware of the costs to them of being imprisoned. They actually might also lose more in terms of career, marriage, contact with children, and a more defined purpose in life. They also have less time ahead of them and fewer chances to make things right, which makes them more aware

of the experienced loss of meaning (Crawley & Sparks, 2011; O'Connor, 2004).

The negative relation between loss of meaning and number of times being imprisoned leaves room for multiple interpretations. The question is whether prisoners with more prison experience have less loss of meaning because they already know what incarceration will mean, or whether this negative association is somehow rooted in the personal meaning system of these prisoners. Although returning to prison is not synonymous with recidivism, there is probably a fair number of recidivists among these prisoners. This brings us to another possible interpretation, or rather a question. Could this negative association be explained by the fact that these prisoners did not resolve their former losses of meaning and other existential issues during and after their earlier imprisonment? As a result, new purposes in life did not appear, and with the absence of new meanings, a new loss of meaning is impossible by definition. Although this seems speculative, we found some support in qualitative studies. Maruna (2001) found important differences in life narratives between ex-convicts who were successfully desisting from crime and persistent offenders. The life narratives of ex-convicts who were successful were marked by new meanings, identities, and purposes in life, which were less self-centered, less materialistic and more fitting in a larger cause. Meaning in life among persistent offenders was marked by the pursuit of more self-centered, empty goals and material happiness. Ronel and Segev (2014) link meaninglessness and existential alienation directly with criminal behavior and recidivism.

Braswell and Wells (2014) argued that existential crises during imprisonment hold the promise of important changes and chances in life. As the study of Maruna (2001) suggests, changed

meanings and purposes in life can support desistance from crime and a better life in general. The question remains whether all prisoners are equipped to surmount such an existential crisis. We hope that future studies will disentangle the relationship between loss of meaning during incarceration, the occurrence of new meanings, and desistance from crime.

Limitations

This study has limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, our measure of loss of meaning is new and has not been validated yet. Until this measure is validated or these results have been duplicated, every conclusion of this study has to be understood as provisional.

Second, our study was cross-sectional, which made it impossible to search for causal relationships or to study the evolution of the variables over time. A longitudinal study might be interesting here, in order to investigate the evolution of the experience of loss of meanings and also of the emergence of new meanings in relationship with distress. The cross-sectional set-up of our study also influenced the way we measured 'loss of meaning'. The retrospective measurement of meaning in life before incarceration might have been influenced by the actual experience of incarceration. The measurement of the actual experience of meaningfulness might in turn have been influenced by the retrospective measurement of meaning in life before prison. It is important though to keep in mind that it was our intention to measure the experienced difference between pre-prison and prison meaning. Although retrospective measurement is always influenced by here-and-now, we probably measured exactly what we intended to measure: the subjective experienced difference in meaning.

In the ideal situation, a longitudinal study would measure meaning and distress before incarceration or even before the crime, and a second time at the beginning of confinement, several measurements during incarceration, and desistance from crime afterwards. Organizing this kind of set-up however, would be extremely difficult, if not impossible. A short time prospective study might be possible, with measurements at the beginning of the incarceration and at certain moments during confinement.

We restricted our sample to prisoners who speak Dutch, the official language in the Northern part of Belgium, but a certain minority in the Belgian prisons are foreign nationals who only speak their native language, such as Arabic, Russian, etcetera. The downside of this restriction is that we did not include this part of the prison population. We hope that future studies would focus on the loss of meaning among these prisoners from cultural minorities. We think there is a role here for smaller studies with a mixed method design, because the experience of incarceration in a foreign country might leave different traces in a prisoner.

Since this was the first quantitative study on the loss of meaning among prisoners, a lot of questions remain unanswered. As we suggested in the discussion section, it would be interesting to study the differences between loss of meaning in first time prisoners and persistent offenders and how they cope with existential issues. Another question is how chaplaincy and therapy influence meaning-making during incarceration, and how this effects the experience of distress. Our measures for therapy attendance and chaplain contact were too basic, and the cross-sectional set-up was not designed to answer this question.

We hope that future studies will replicate our study and explore related subjects such as ways of coping with loss of meaning through an emerging search for meaning, meaning-

making efforts and posttraumatic growth among people who are incarcerated.

Conclusions

Distress in prison has been associated in qualitative studies with financial, social, relational and personal losses (Liebling & Maruna, 2011). Losses of meaning and purpose in life have also been named as possible effects of incarceration and crime (Ferrito et al., 2012; Maruna et al., 2006). Within the limitations of this study, we found that a loss of meaning during incarceration is a predictor of distress during incarceration. This confirms the idea that incarceration might have the capacity to evoke an existential crisis, with higher levels of distress as a consequence.

The regime of the prison institute predicted distress but did not influence the experience of the loss of meaning, nor did it influence the relationship between loss of meaning and distress. Psychotherapy did not affect the relationship between loss of meaning and prison distress. Apparently, neither therapy nor chaplain support can prevent the existential clash. We suspect, however, that each may play an important role in building up new meanings in life.

Our study also showed that certain groups of prisoners seem to suffer more from a loss of meaning. Un-sentenced prisoners showed higher levels of loss of meaning. In fact, we found that being un-sentenced amplified the effect of loss of meaning on distress in prison. Older prisoners also seemed to suffer more from a loss of meaning. Prisoners who returned to prison show lower levels of loss of meaning. More research is needed to explore what this actually means. In the worst case, this could mean that the existential issues in these prisoners would have

reached a more chronic unresolved stage.

We hope that our study might serve as a wake-up call to address these existential topics and the loss of meaning in research and in our daily contact with prisoners and offenders. Knowing more about meaning-making and distress in prison may help prison regimes, staff and volunteers to better support prisoners' journey of desistance from crime.

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Chapter 3

Coping Strategies and Search for Meaning as Predictors of Posttraumatic Growth in Prison

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Abstract

Recent qualitative studies have highlighted posttraumatic growth as a profound change in offenders' self-perception, relationship qualities, and purposes and meaning in life. In dealing with their challenged global meanings, these offenders also developed a stronger sense of responsibility for their victims and for the consequences of their crimes. In this study, we examined possible predictors of posttraumatic growth during incarceration. In a sample of 365 prisoners, we tested whether coping strategies such as seeking emotional support, religious coping, and searching for meaning predicted posttraumatic growth in a positive way. Conversely, we examined whether denial, substance use and behavioral disengagement would be negative predictors of posttraumatic growth. We performed univariate analyses and hierarchical multiple regression analyses, which supported our hypotheses about the positive predictors of posttraumatic growth. Behavioral disengagement, on the other hand, was negatively associated with posttraumatic growth.

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Introduction

Throughout history, remarkable individuals such as Gandhi, Malcolm X, and St.-John of the Cross experienced positive personal changes during their prison time (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, 1991; O'Connor & Duncan, 2011). St.-John of the Cross, who was tortured during his incarceration, wrote his best mystic poetry in his dark prison cell and experienced transformative visions. Paradoxically, it was the horror of his prison experience that led him to a profound understanding of the connection of all things. This kind of transformation was not just a way of coping or a positive reappraisal of the experienced terror. It was a profound personal change that allowed him to appreciate life in a much deeper way and to be more compassionate towards other people (Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, 1991). At the first sight, these transformations as a result of imprisonment seem to contradict the broad consensus about incarceration leaving deep negative traces in prisoners' lives (Haney, 2012). But when we look closer, these changes are intertwined with the negative experience of imprisonment itself.

In general, positive personal changes that emerge after dealing with the adversities of life have been called *posttraumatic growth* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Posttraumatic growth has been studied over a number of different circumstances and populations such as cancer and HIV-patients, victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, war, natural disasters, and terrorist attacks (for an overview see Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Cho & Park, 2013). The stories of these survivors illustrate that those who are able to transcend their adversity experience profound transformations and improve their resilience towards future distressing life events (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2012). Posttraumatic

growth is often described as a fundamental shift in the person's sense of self, in a deeper appreciation of relationships, and in a richer spiritual life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Recent qualitative studies reported explicit signs of posttraumatic growth among offenders and prisoners (Elisha et al. 2013; Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Vanhooren et al., 2015; van Ginneken, 2014). Posttraumatic growth in this population is particularly triggered by the distress experienced during incarceration and by the awareness of the consequences of the crime (Ferrito et al. 2012; van Ginneken, 2014). Posttraumatic growth in offenders is marked by important changes in self-awareness, in a higher appreciation of relationships, in new purposes and meaning in life, and in a deeper understanding of the severity and consequences of the crime (Elisha et al., 2013; Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; van Ginneken, 2014). Interestingly, there is a strong resemblance between the outcome of posttraumatic growth and the characteristic qualities that would facilitate an offender's desistance from crime (Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012).

Due to a lack of quantitative empirical studies on posttraumatic growth among prisoners and offenders, important questions remain unanswered. If we could identify which variables are associated with posttraumatic growth during incarceration (van Ginneken, 2014) prison staff and psychotherapists would be better able to foster posttraumatic growth in prisoners and increase prisoners' chances to desist from crime (Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; van Ginneken, 2014).

Posttraumatic Growth among Offenders and Coping Strategies

The study of posttraumatic growth among offenders and prisoners is very new. To the best of our knowledge, only a handful of qualitative studies have addressed this subject in this population. These studies have identified certain coping strategies that have helped the participants deal with the initial loss of meaning provoked by the crime and incarceration. Coping is generally understood as the way individuals try to adjust to stressful situations, using affective-cognitive and behavioral strategies to eliminate the stressful condition or the associated emotional distress (Holahan et al., 1996). In the *meaning-making model* (Park, 2010), coping strategies are understood as meaning-making processes. In this model, distress would arise if the appraised meaning of the stressful condition would threaten one's global meaning in life. People would engage in meaning-making processes in order to reduce the distress. Depending on the specific coping strategies or meaning-making processes, coping would lead to the elimination of the distress by changing the appraised meaning of the situation (e.g. by distortion of the original distressing situation, by denial or by substance abuse), or coping would lead to the elimination of distress by a recalibration of person's meaning in life or posttraumatic growth. Examples of coping strategies that would support the emergence posttraumatic growth are social support, emotional support, the search for new meanings, and religious coping (Park, 2010).

Qualitative studies among offenders found that emotional and social support (Elisha et al., 2013; Ferrito et al., 2012; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012) was an important coping strategy associated with posttraumatic growth. In a qualitative study of 38 imprisoned male sex-offenders, Elisha et al. (2013) analyzed

the changes that these prisoners experienced during their prison time. Crucial in this process was the role of social acceptance in different kinds of human relationships. The acceptance in these relationships was marked, on one hand, by respect for the sex-offender as a person and, on the other hand, by asking the offender to take responsibility for the crime. This type of acceptance was necessary for sex-offenders to deal with the consequences of incarceration, to face the consequences of their deeds, and to learn how to cope with the pain they experienced as a result of childhood abuse.

An important mode of social and emotional support was the reliance on therapeutic relationships. The experience of a therapeutic relationship was found to be highly corrective and transformative for offenders (Ferrito et al., 2012; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; van Ginneken 2014). This experience helped them find new ways to connect with people outside the therapy and led to posttraumatic growth.

The qualitative studies on posttraumatic growth among offenders also highlighted the importance of religious or spiritual coping. Different studies gave examples of how religion instilled hope and gave certain prisoners a redemptive perspective on their life (Elisha et al., 2013; Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; van Ginneken, 2014). Religion provided important answers to difficult existential questions during their search for meaning. Some participants noted that religion helped them to experience their prison time as an opportunity to change their life, resulting in posttraumatic growth (Elisha et al., 2013; Guse & Hudson, 2014).

Another way of dealing with the distress evoked by the crime and the incarceration was the search for new meanings. Ferrito et al. (2012) analyzed the reports of seven offenders about their

therapeutic process during incarceration. The researchers reported that the search for meaning after committing the crime took a central role in the prisoners' change. For these prisoners, and also for prisoners in other qualitative studies, incarceration was experienced as a turning point in life (Elisha et al., 2013; Ferrito et al., 2012; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012, van Ginneken, 2014).

Interestingly, the use of social support and religious coping has also been described as important ways to deal with prison and societal reintegration. Prison studies also have addressed coping strategies such as denial, substance abuse and behavioral disengagement. These coping strategies have not been addressed by the qualitative studies on posttraumatic growth among offenders, because they only focused on successful cases of growth. We are interested in these coping strategies as well, because they might be associated with posttraumatic growth in a negative way.

Emotional Support and Religious Coping during Incarceration and Societal Reentry

Prison studies have highlighted the importance of social and emotional support from others during incarceration (Condon et al., 2008; Maschi et al., 2014; Ronel & Elisha, 2011; Walker, 2011). In a qualitative study in twelve different prisons, 111 prisoners were interviewed about their health during incarceration (Condon et al., 2008). Continuing contact with family and friends was found to be the most important factor in their maintaining their mental health while in prison. In another study of coping resources and well-being in a sample of 677 male prisoners, social support was found to facilitate mental well-being during incarceration (Maschi et al., 2014).

Spirituality has also been described as a key resource for many prisoners to cope with incarceration. O' Connor and Duncan (2011) argue that prisoners attend religious, spiritual and humanistic practices much more than they did before they got incarcerated. A systematic review of empirical data on religion, spirituality and mental health in a prison context showed that religious coping is associated with a reduction of incidents and disciplinary sanctions during incarceration (Eytan, 2011). There are also indications that religiosity and spirituality are associated with a lower frequency and severity of depression during imprisonment (Allen et al. 2008; Eytan, 2011; Mandhouj et al., 2014). In a study of Muslim prisoners, the outcome of a religiously inspired therapy program showed a decrease in suicidal depression and feelings of meaninglessness (Tehrani, 1997). Van Tongeren and Klebe (2010) concluded that prisoners who show the highest levels of spiritual well-being are thought to be the best suited in both navigating prison life and in re-assimilating to society afterwards. In a study of Bakken et al. (2014) (n = 920), spirituality was found to be a highly important coping style to prevent relapse to substance abuse during societal reentry.

Denial, Avoidance, Behavioral Disengagement and Substance Abuse

Since the qualitative studies on posttraumatic growth among offenders only focused on successful cases, they didn't identify any coping strategies that might undermine the process that leads to posttraumatic growth. In general, we would expect coping strategies such as denial, avoidance, behavioral disengagement and substance abuse to decrease one's positive

outcome and growth changes (Joseph, 2011; Park, 2010). These coping strategies have been found to be maladaptive in the general population (for an overview see Zeidner & Endler, 1996). Although denial and avoidance have been described as effective coping strategies in dealing with stress in the initial crisis period, these coping strategies increase eventually the level of distress and create future problems (Holohan et al., 1996; Zeidner & Endler, 1996). Behavioral disengagement, i.e., reducing one's effort to deal with the stressor, is a predictor of more distress and a poorer health outcome in the long run (Carver, 1997).

The use of these coping strategies is known to be quite common among offenders. For example, denial of the crime or blaming the victim would help the offender to protect his or her global meaning of being an 'innocent and good' person (Mashi & Gibson, 2012; Vanhooren, 2006, 2011). The cost of using these coping strategies is rather high. Denial, avoidance, behavioral disengagement, and substance abuse are disastrous impediments to successful reintegration into society (Phillips & Lindsay, 2011).

In a study on coping with loneliness, Rokach (1997) compared the coping styles of prisoners and non-prisoners. Prisoners – more than the non-prisoners – preferred to avoid reality, especially through drug use. Medication and illegal drugs are very often used to regulate or to block one's emotions of anxiety and despair during prison time (Byrne & Howells, 2002; Grella, 2013; Nedderman et al., 2010; Walker, 2011). In a mixed-method study with twenty prisoners, Phillips and Lindsay (2011) found that avoidance, behavioral disengagement and substance abuse were strongly associated with recidivism.

Search for Meaning

One could argue whether searching for new meanings is just another coping strategy just as seeking social support or denial is, or if it is a broader concept with a different quality. Coping strategies like emotional support, religious coping, and therapy seem to support a search for meaning (Ferrito et al., 2012; Joseph, 2011), which confirms the idea that search for meaning might be a process by itself (Wong, 2014). Steger et al. (2008) defines searching for meaning as the individuals' desire and effort to establish or increase their understanding and experience of meaning in their lives.

Importantly, searching for meaning as such does not always lead to better adjustment or well-being. In non-offender populations, research has shown that a search for meaning was only associated with well-being when there was also a fair amount of presence of meaning in these people's life (Dezutter et al., 2013; Dezutter et al., 2014; Steger, 2013). Although a search for meaning seems to be a sine qua non for posttraumatic growth (Joseph, 2011), only a search for meaning that is successful and leads to new meanings is associated with posttraumatic growth and adjustment to the new life situation (Park, 2010). Coping strategies like social and emotional support are very important resources to rebuild one's global meanings (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Joseph, 2011). A supportive social network or even a single human encounter can encourage a person not to withdraw but to keep on searching for new purposes in life and to change for the better (Joseph, 2011). Religion and spirituality are suppliers of new global meanings (Maruna et al., 2006; Park, 2010).

Although searching for meaning as such has not been studied among prisoners or offenders, there are indications that some

prisoners embark on an existential journey during their prison time (Harvey, 2011; Mooren, 2013; O'Connor & Duncan, 2004; Qouta et al., 1997; Thomas & Zaitzow, 2012). In a qualitative study, 75 prisoners described how the fundamental questions about life and their place in the world were evoked by incarceration (Maruna et al., 2006). A profound search for meaning was at stake. Personal existential questioning was magnified by the fact that there was so much time to reflect in prison. The need to talk about existential themes in prison has also been found to be much more important than therapists often presume (Morgan & Winterowd, 2002).

Aim of This Study

As we mentioned earlier, qualitative studies on posttraumatic growth have highlighted the role of social and emotional support, religious coping and the search for meaning as important elements in the offenders' process towards posttraumatic growth (Elisha et al., 2013; Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; van Ginneken, 2014). Social coping and religious or spiritual coping have also been found to be adaptive coping strategies offenders use during incarceration as well as during societal reentry (Bakken et al., 2014; Eytan, 2011; Maschi et al., 2014; Ronel & Elisha, 2011). On the other hand, denial, substance abuse, and behavioral disengagement have been found to be maladaptive to prison and have been associated with recidivism (Byrne & Howells, 2002; Grella, 2013; Nedderman et al., 2010; Phillips & Lindsay, 2011; Rokach, 1997). However, there are no quantitative studies available that have explored the associations between these coping strategies and posttraumatic growth among offenders. Therefore, we set up

a quantitative study to test if specific coping strategies as well as search for meaning are related to posttraumatic growth in a sample of prisoners.

Based on previous qualitative studies as well as on the 'meaning-making model' (Park, 2010), we expect that emotional support by others and religious or spiritual coping, as well as search for meaning will be positive predictors of posttraumatic growth during incarceration. Furthermore, we hypothesize that denial, substance abuse and behavioral disengagement will be negative predictors of posttraumatic growth in offenders (Joseph, 2011; Park, 2010).

Method

Procedure

A cross-sectional study with a final sample of 365 prisoners was performed at three prisons in Belgium. The prison in Brugge (PCB) is a closed regime prison with a medium to high risk population. The prison contains a separate block for non-convicted prisoners and a separate block for female prisoners. The small prison of Ieper holds high to medium risk prisoners. The prison of Ruislede (PLC) has an open regime and contains only low to medium risk convicted male prisoners.

All Dutch-speaking prisoners who were available at the moment of the research were invited to participate. The first author had a brief contact with each prisoner in order to explain the purpose of the study. Prisoners who were willing to participate signed an informed consent document. The informed consent document and the study itself were approved by the ethical commission of the University of Leuven (Belgium) and by

the Belgian General Directory of prison institutions.

In the prison of Brugge, the prisoners completed the questionnaire in their cells. In the prisons of Ieper and Ruislede, the questionnaires were also individually completed, but in a separate office. The reason for this difference was due to organizational circumstances in the different institutions. In order to protect the privacy of the prisoners, the first author personally collected the completed questionnaire in an anonymous sealed envelope. In this way, the information was not shared with the prison staff and maximum confidentiality was guaranteed.

In Brugge, all 421 Dutch-speaking prisoners who were available were invited to participate. The informed consent document was signed by 366 prisoners; 350 handed the sealed envelope to the researcher (response rate: 95.63%). Reasons for non-participating were: "upcoming transfer to another prison" (0.73%), "too busy" (0.91%), "not interested" (2.10%), and "being sick" (0.63%). The returned envelopes contained 46 blank (or almost blank) questionnaires. These questionnaires were omitted from the study. Finally, the questionnaires of 304 prisoners (83%) were utilized in this study.

In Ruislede, 46 Dutch-speaking prisoners were available, 41 prisoners signed the informed consent document and completed the questionnaire (response rate: 89.13%). Reasons for non-participating were: "no time" (6.52%) and "feeling lazy" (4.35%).

In Ieper, 23 Dutch-speaking prisoners were available, 20 signed the informed consent document and completed the questionnaire (response rate: 86.96%). Reasons for non-participating were: "too difficult" (5.22%) and "not interested" (7.82%).

In total, 365 prisoners participated over the three prisons. A large majority of the prisoners was located in Brugge (83.29%),

followed by Ruislede (11.23%) and Ieper (5.48%). The study was conducted from March 2014 until July 2014.

Participants

In our sample 312 prisoners (85.50%) were male, and 53 (14.50%) were female prisoners. The mean age of the participants was 40.01 years (SD 12.42). The educational level was assessed by the highest diploma: 27.7% finished only primary school, 58.2% finished secondary school, 8.3% graduated with a bachelor's degree and 5.8% graduated with a university degree. Most prisoners were already convicted (81.40%); only a minority was taken into pretrial custody (18.60%). The cultural-religious background of the participants was primarily Christian (63.10%), followed by atheists (8.20%), Muslims (7.00%), Buddhists (1.40%), Jews (0.60%) and others (19.20%). Most prisoners were not first-time offenders: on average, they'd been imprisoned 2.57 times (SD 1.46). They had spent an average of 38.54 (SD 38.14) months in prison during this incarceration. As for the crimes for which these prisoners were convicted or taken into custody: 34.30% were drug-related, 15.10% for murder, 13.10% for other interpersonal violence, 11.40% for sexual delinquency, 7.00% for fraud, 4.20% for burglary, 3.90% for theft and robbery, 2.80% for arson and 8.30% for other crimes. The majority of the participants (53.70%) experienced violence during their childhood. More specifically, 16.30% of the participants were sexually abused (with or without physical violence), 17.10% experienced physical violence (without sexual violence, with or without witnessing violence at home and being bullied at school), 13.10% witnessed violence at home (without being sexually or physically violated) and 7.10% were bullied at school (without being sexually or physically

violated). The majority of the participants worked during their incarceration (54.50%), and a minority pursued education during their prison time (18.70%). A minority was in therapy (19.70%), and a significant group had contacts on a regular basis with a chaplain (44.20%).

Measures

The *Posttraumatic Growth-Inventory* (PTG-I, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), a widely used measure of posttraumatic growth, is a 21-item scale comprised of five subscales: New Possibilities (e.g. "I established a new path for my life"), Relating to Others (e.g. "I have a greater sense of closeness with others"), Personal Strength (e.g. "I know better that I can handle difficulties"), Spiritual Change (e.g. "I have a better understanding of spiritual matters"), and Appreciation of Life (e.g. "I can better appreciate each day"). Each item is scored on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*I did not experience this change as a result of my crisis*) to 5 (*I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of my crisis*). Higher scores on the PTG-I indicate more growth. It has an internal consistency of .90 and a test-retest reliability of .71 (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Because no Dutch translation was available, a translation team (consisting of two native Dutch speakers and one native English speaker), provided a Dutch version of the scale. In our sample, the translated Dutch PTG-I had a Cronbach's Alpha of .93.

The *Meaning in Life questionnaire* (MLQ, Steger et al., 2006) has been used in many studies to assess presence of meaning as well as the active search for meaning (Steger, 2013). The questionnaire has two subscales, Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning. Confirmatory factor analyses in multiple

populations revealed a two-factor structure and good internal consistency (Steger et al., 2006). For this study, we only used the Search for Meaning-subscale, which consists of five items (e.g. "I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful"). Each item is scored on a 5 point Likert-scale, ranging from 1 (*Absolutely untrue*) to 5 (*Absolutely true*). In our sample, Cronbach's Alpha of this subscale was .85. Because no Dutch translation was available, a team of four researchers worked on a translation through consensus and back-translation into English.

The *Brief COPE subscales* (Carver, 1997) have regularly been used in many studies on life stress, meaning-making processes, and health-related studies (Carver, 1997; Park, 2010). The Brief COPE is a valid shortened version of the Full COPE. The Brief COPE consists of fourteen subscales, of two items each. The subscales can be used separately depending on the researchers' choice. For this study, we picked out the subscales Using Emotional Support (e.g. "I have been getting comfort and understanding from someone"), Religion (e.g. "I have been praying or meditating"), Denial (e.g. "I have been refusing to believe that this is happened"), Substance Use (e.g. "I have been using alcohol or other drugs to make myself feel better"), and Behavioral Disengagement (e.g. "I have been giving up trying to deal with it"). Cronbach's Alpha of the subscale Using Emotional Support in our sample was .74, for Religion .87, for Denial .63, Substance Use .92, and Behavioral Disengagement' .63. The same procedure was used to translate these scales into Dutch as with the MLQ.

Demographic information was obtained through the self-reported questionnaire regarding gender, age, level of education, religious-cultural background, whether or not being in therapy, being supported by a chaplain, working in prison or taking a

form of education in prison, number of times being incarcerated, time spent in prison this time, prison institution, kind of crime committed, and traumatic experiences during childhood.

Analytical Strategy

All analyses were performed in SPSS 22.0. First, Pearson correlations were calculated between demographic variables (age, educational level), prison variables (number of times being imprisoned and the amount of time spent in prison during this incarceration) and our study variables (emotional support, religious coping, denial, substance use, behavioral disengagement, search for meaning and posttraumatic growth). Univariate analyses were performed on gender, therapy attendance and chaplain support, with regard to mean differences on posttraumatic growth. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed to determine the relative importance of the specific coping strategies and of search for meaning in predicting posttraumatic growth.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Correlations are presented in Table 1. Age and educational level were significantly and positively related with denial, substance use, and negatively related with posttraumatic growth. Number of times being imprisoned is negatively related with denial and substance use, whereas the actual time spent in prison during this incarceration is positively related with posttraumatic growth and search for meaning. With regard to our study variables,

emotional support, religious coping and search for meaning were positively related with posttraumatic growth. Behavioral disengagement, on the other hand, showed a significant negative relation with posttraumatic growth. Furthermore, search for meaning was positively related with religious coping. Average scores on posttraumatic growth suggest a small amount of posttraumatic growth (M = 2.52, SD = 1.13).

Mean-level analyses of posttraumatic growth showed significant differences ($F(1, 359) = 7.88$, $p < .01$) between inmates who received visits of a chaplain (M = 2.70, SD = 1.10) compared with inmates who did not (M = 2.37, SD = 1.14), with the latter showing lower levels of posttraumatic growth. Similarly, inmates who received therapy reported higher levels of posttraumatic growth (M = 2.90, SD = 1.09) than their counterparts who did not receive therapy (M = 2.42, SD = 1.12) ($F(1, 360) = 10.17$, $p < .01$). There were no significant differences between male and female prisoners regarding posttraumatic growth ($F(1, 360)= 2.08$, *ns*).

Primary Analyses

In order to determine the relative importance of the specific coping strategies and of search for meaning in predicting posttraumatic growth, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed. Age and educational level were entered as control variables in Step 1. Number of times being imprisoned and the actual time spent in prison were entered as prison-related variables in Step 2. Given that the specific coping strategies were not associated with search for meaning (except for religious coping), the distinct coping strategies are entered in Step 3.

Tabel 1

Correlations of Demographic Information, Prison Variables, Coping Strategies, and Posttraumatic Growth.

		1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.
1.	Age	1										
2.	Educational Level	.19**	1									
3.	Times in Prison	-.16**	-.15**	1								
4.	Time spent in Prison	.26***	- .03	- .07	1							
5.	Denial	.27***	.15**	- .12*	.03	1						
6.	Substance Use	-.34***	- .16**	- .19**	.02	- .07	1					
7.	Dis-engagement	.03	.05	- .01	.06	.32***	.20***	1				
8.	Emotional Support	-.07	- .10	- .04	- .01	.03	- .03	- .10	1			
9.	Religious Coping	.09	.07	- .02	.01	.16**	- .09	.12*	.10	1		
10.	Search for Meaning	-.09	- .03	- .05	.12*	.07	.09	.12*	.05	.17**	1	
11.	Posttraumatic Growth	-.12*	- .19**	.06	.18**	.02	- .01	-.18**	.39***	.20***	.22***	1

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

In order to investigate if search for meaning added significantly to the prediction of posttraumatic growth after controlling for the coping strategies, search for meaning is entered in Step 4. Table 2 presents the regression coefficients.

Table 2
*Hierarchical Regression Predicting Posttraumatic Growth.** $p < .05$,

Predictor	β Step 1	β Step 2	β Step 3	β Step 4
Age	- .09	- .14 *	- .18 **	-.15 **
Educational level	- .17 **	- .15 **	- .13 *	- .13 *
Number of times in prison		.02	.06	.07
Months in prison		.21 ***	.23 ***	.21 ***
Denial			.11 *	.10
Substance use			- .03	- .04
Emotional support			.32 ***	.32 ***
Disengagement			- .21 ***	- .22 ***
Religious coping			.20 ***	.17 **
Search for meaning				.16 **
Δ R^2	.04 **	.04**	.21 ***	.02 **

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

The variables (age and educational level) entered in Step 1 significantly predicted posttraumatic growth ($R^2 = .04$, $F(2, 317) = 7.08$, $p < .01$). This was due to a significantly negative effect of educational level. The variables entered in Step 2 explained

additional variance (ΔR^2 = .04, $F(2, 315)$ = 7.16, p < .001), and the amount of time having spend during the actual incarceration was a significant positive predictor of posttraumatic growth (β = .21, p < .001). In Step 3, the coping strategies significantly predicted posttraumatic growth (ΔR^2 = .21, $F(5, 310)$ = 14.27, p < .001) after controlling for age, educational level and prison-related variables. Posttraumatic growth was positively predicted by emotional support (β = .32, p < .001) and religious coping (β = .20, p < .001), and negatively predicted by behavioral disengagement (β = -.21, p < .001). Finally, search for meaning (β = .16, p < .01). positively predicted posttraumatic growth after controlling for the socio-demographic variables of age and education, the prison-related variables and the distinct coping strategies (ΔR^2 = .02, $F(1, 309)$ = 14.22, p < .001).

Discussion

In a sample of 365 prisoners, we conducted a cross-sectional study focusing on predictors of posttraumatic growth during incarceration. Specifically, we hypothesized that emotional support, religious coping, and searching for meaning would be positive predictors, whereas denial, substance use and behavioral disengagement were expected to be negative predictors of posttraumatic growth.

As expected, emotional support, religious coping and search for meaning were identified as positive predictors of posttraumatic growth. These findings are consistent with the qualitative studies on posttraumatic growth among offenders (Elisha et al., 2013; Ferrito et al., 2012; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012, van Ginneken,2014), as well as with studies on posttraumatic growth in the general population (Cho & Park, 2013; Helgeson et

al., 2006; Prati & Pietrantioni, 2009). Behavioral disengagement was found to be a negative predictor of posttraumatic growth, which is also consistent with studies on maladjustment in offender and non-offender populations (Carver, 1997; Phillips & Lindsay, 2011) and studies on posttraumatic growth in the general population (Triplett et al., 2012). Denial and substance use on the other hand, were not identified as predictive coping strategies.

Although we did not expect these variables to play an important role, age and education turned out to be negative predictors and the amount of time spent in prison during the actual incarceration turned out to be a positive predictor of posttraumatic growth. Moreover, we found that psychotherapy and being supported by a chaplain were significantly related to posttraumatic growth in a positive way.

As expected, searching for meaning led to higher levels of posttraumatic growth in this study. For a start, this means that there are prisoners who actively search for new meanings and purposes in life during their prison time. Qualitative studies have mentioned this phenomenon (Ferrito et al., 2012; Maruna et al., 2006). New here is the fact that we actually measured the appearance of this search for meaning and that this predicts posttraumatic growth in a positive way. Higher levels of posttraumatic growth mean a shift in one's sense of self, in a higher appreciation of important relationships, and a changed philosophy of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This means there is a group of prisoners who not only search for meaning, but also succeed in finding new meanings, which results in posttraumatic growth as a result of incarceration. As the qualitative studies suggested, other coping styles might play an important role in generating these new meanings (cf. supra).

In general, emotional support is found to be an important factor in posttraumatic growth, because being listened to by others helps a person work through the emotional elements of the distressing event and to create new narratives and meanings (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In our study, emotional support turned out to be a positive predictor of posttraumatic growth. It is not a coincidence that we also found a significant positive relationship between psychotherapy and posttraumatic growth in our sample. One of the main ingredients of successful psychotherapy is the empathic and therapeutic relationship (Norcross, 2002). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2013) describe therapists as 'expert companions' and empathy as crucial for posttraumatic growth to evolve. For offenders, empathic understanding of their inner world can help them to engage in a deeper reflective process about the consequences of the crime, but also about their own painful and traumatic past experiences (Elisha et al., 2013; Vanhooren, 2011). In working through these issues, the therapist encourages the client to pursue his or her search for new meanings (Joseph, 2011).

The significant positive relationship that we found between posttraumatic growth and support by chaplains can be explained in the same way. Moreover, chaplains also support religious coping, which was found to be another important positive predictor in our sample. As we mentioned earlier, religious and spiritual coping have been identified as very important coping strategies for many prisoners, who often use religion and other spiritual resources to find new meanings in their life (Maruna et al., 2006). In the general population, religious and spiritual coping has also been associated with posttraumatic growth (Helgeson et al., 2006; Prati & Pietrantioni, 2009).

Behavioral disengagement was a strong negative predictor

in our sample. Earlier studies have shown that behavioral disengagement is associated with recidivism (Phillips & Lindsay, 2011). In general, behavioral disengagement was found to be maladaptive and even a predictor of more distress in the future. Behavioral disengagement has also been associated with lower levels of posttraumatic growth in non-offender populations (Triplett et al., 2012). Behavioral disengagement might be explained by a lack of coping skills, a lack of courage to deal with the experience of failure, or a lack of hardiness (Maddi, 2014). In this case, a prisoner would experience a loss of meaning by incarceration and the crime, but would give up trying to find new global meanings (Triplett et al., 2012). In this case, posttraumatic growth would not occur. Our findings seem to support this idea.

Interestingly, we also found other predictors for posttraumatic growth during incarceration. The amount of time the prisoner spent in prison was related with higher levels of posttraumatic growth. This makes sense, because posttraumatic growth does not appear right after a distressing event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Posttraumatic growth only occurs after a process of affective and cognitive labor, which takes a certain amount of time (Helgeson et al., 2006). It is also possible that being given a longer sentence creates a bigger threat and more substantial loss to the prisoner than a short sentence. In this way, posttraumatic growth would be more likely to occur in the first case, since the chance that the global meanings are threatened are higher.

We also found that older prisoners achieved lower levels of posttraumatic growth than their younger inmates. A similar trend has been found in non-offender populations such as HIV-patients and cancer-patients (Milam, 2006). This is harder to interpret, since there could be several reasons why older prisoners would score lower on posttraumatic growth. It is not clear whether they

suffered less from a loss of global meanings, or whether they had a harder time to find new meanings in life.

The same question arises about our findings that higher education is a negative predictor of posttraumatic growth. Studies on posttraumatic growth in other non-offender populations often show contrary results; higher education and socio-economic status are usually positively associated with posttraumatic growth (Stanton et al., 2006; Milam, 2006; Salo et al., 2005). In our own pilot study with 30 sex-offenders, we also found that education was negatively associated with posttraumatic growth (Vanhooren et al., 2015). Although this might be a recurrent phenomenon for offenders, we don't have an immediate explanation.

To our surprise, substance abuse didn't have any significant effect on posttraumatic growth. We wonder if a more detailed questionnaire on the use of drugs would have yielded a different result. Based on our clinical experiences with prisoners, we could expect that the use of hard drugs would have a negative relation with posttraumatic growth, whereas occasional use of soft drugs might be neutral or even be positively related with posttraumatic growth, depending on other coping resources.

Also denial turned out not to be a negative predictor. When we look closer, we even see an almost positive predictive value of denial on posttraumatic growth. Although this might sound counterintuitive, forms of denial in combination with having intrusive thoughts in the first period after a distressing life event have been associated with early forms of posttraumatic growth in the general population (Helgeson et al., 2006). In fact, the combination of denial and intrusive thoughts suggests the presence of distress and a loss of meaning, which are the precursors of posttraumatic growth (Joseph, 2011; Triplett et al., 2012). Triplett et al. (2012) suggest that intrusive thinking

has an activating effect on more deliberate and active forms of processing, which result in posttraumatic growth. The positive effect of denial and intrusive thoughts would only run through the activation of deliberative thinking. Denial and intrusive thinking by itself wouldn't have a positive effect on posttraumatic growth in the long run (Triplett et al., 2012).

Limitations

This study has some limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting the results. Being a cross-sectional study, we were not able to search for causal relationships, or the evolution of coping strategies, search for meaning and posttraumatic growth over time. We restricted our sample to prisoners who speak Dutch, the official language in the Northern part of Belgium, but a certain minority in the Belgian prisons are foreign nationals who only speak their native language, such as Arabic, Russian, etc. The downside of this restriction is that we didn't include this part of the prison population. We hope that future studies would focus on posttraumatic growth among prisoners from cultural minorities. We think there is a role here for smaller studies with a mixed method design, because the experience of incarceration in a foreign country might leave different traces in a prisoner and 'growth' might be experienced in different way.

An important suggestion for future research about therapy attendance and posttraumatic growth is to distinguish prisoners who are at the start of their therapy from prisoners who are in the ending stages or who have completed their therapy. We didn't make this distinction. We wonder if the level of posttraumatic growth in the latter group would even be higher compared with

therapy starters or non-attendees. Other variables, such as substance use and denial need to be studied more in detail as well. As we suggested, a distinction should be made between the use of hard drugs and soft drugs, and between occasional and habitual use. Other coping strategies, such as denial, could be studied more in detail. A longitudinal study on cognitive processes and posttraumatic growth might clarify whether intrusive thinking indeed turns into deliberate thinking and whether intrusive thinking is in this way a predictor of posttraumatic growth.

Another important issue is the relationship between posttraumatic growth in prisoners and desistance from crime. Although qualitative studies have suggested this relationship (Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012), longitudinal studies are needed to get more clarity on this subject. Since this was the first quantitative study on posttraumatic growth among prisoners, we want to emphasize that this study needs replication.

Conclusions

Everybody would probably sign up for the positive changes that accompany posttraumatic growth. However, posttraumatic growth cannot be taken for granted and does not appear without the initial personal crisis and the subsequent period of trying to make sense of what happened (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In this study, we focused on the coping strategies that might help or impede the process that leads to posttraumatic growth and new meanings in life during incarceration. Emotional understanding by others and religious coping were clearly supportive of this process. Behavioral disengagement, or giving up coping, impeded posttraumatic growth, as expected.

At the heart of the process that leads to growth lies the attempt to rebuild a new identity and a meaningful life. Searching for new meanings predicted posttraumatic growth in this study. This also means that there is indeed a group of prisoners who embark for an existential quest during incarceration and succeed in acquiring a new set of beliefs during this process. Sadly enough, the fact that behavioral disengagement was found to be a negative predictor of growth might mean that there is also a group of prisoners who don't have the capacity, the courage, or the support for positive change during their prison time. More research is needed to identify the characteristics that are associated with the use of the positive coping strategies as well with search for meaning and behavioral disengagement. In this way, we might be able to help those who give up along the road, and support those who are on their way to personal change.

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Chapter 4

Posttraumatic Growth in Sex Offenders: A Pilot Study with a Mixed Method Design

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Abstract

In recent qualitative studies, posttraumatic growth has been highlighted as a possible sign of change in how offenders relate to their basic existential needs. In this article, we present results of a pilot study with a mixed method design on posttraumatic growth and psychological stress in a sample of sexual offenders (n = 30) in on-going therapy. We performed univariate analyses and subsequent hierarchical analyses, and the results affirmed our hypothesis that posttraumatic growth is negatively associated with psychological stress. We used phenomenological analysis to identify themes in the participants' reflections on posttraumatic growth. We found that prison experiences forced the participants to change. Prisoners experience emotional support from others during incarceration as crucial to positive change. Taking responsibility for the crime helped them engage in the therapy more fully and resulted in more posttraumatic growth.

8 Vanhooren, S., Leijssen, M., & Dezutter, J. (2015). Vanhooren, S., Leijssen, M., & Dezutter, J. (2015). Posttraumatic growth in sex offenders: A pilot study with a mixed-method design. *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology.* Advance online publication. doi:10.1177/0306624X15590834

Introduction

The purpose of offender therapy has slowly been shifting from solely risk management to also supporting offenders to lead a more fulfilling and meaningful life (Wormith et al., 2007). This gradual change has been induced by newer theoretical visions of rehabilitation such as the Good Lives Model, positive criminology, and humanistic approaches towards crime (Gunst, 2012; Polizzi et al., 2014; Ronel & Elisha, 2011; Ward & Brown, 2004). The tenet of the Good Lives Model is that offenders have the same basic existential needs as any other individual. Just like anybody else, they long to love and to be loved, to develop meaningful relationships, to experience mastery, and to have a purpose and meaning in life (Ward & Brown, 2004). The way offenders try to achieve these basic needs is often through antisocial behavior (e.g. through abuse, violence, fraud or theft), or by deviant or conflicting means (such as sexual intimacy with children, haughtiness, absolute power, materialism) (Ward & Fortune, 2014). The Good Lives Model suggests that therapy should help to re-direct the way offenders try to fulfill their needs. From this point of view, finding well-adjusted ways to meet these basic needs and living a meaningful life would help the offender to desist from crime (Ward & Fortune, 2014; Ronel & Segev, 2014).

In the general population, significant changes in how people relate to their basic existential needs have been reported and described as *posttraumatic growth*. Posttraumatic growth was originally described as the positive change in victims after struggling with a distressing life event. This change can be understood as a significant shift in one's connection to oneself, in stronger relationships with others, in a deeper appreciation

for life, in an increased sense of personal strength, in different priorities, and in a richer spiritual life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Every aspect of this kind of growth indicates a fundamental change in how one encounters her or his basic existential needs.

Posttraumatic growth is the hard-earned result of suffering from and working through the issues that have arisen in the wake of a distressing life event (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Characteristic of the onset of this growth process is that the distressing life event would challenge ones' fundamental beliefs or global meanings about oneself, the other, the world, and one's subjective sense of meaning in life (Park, 2010). This kind of change can neither be taught nor trained; it can only be achieved in an experiential way (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Interestingly, people who experience posttraumatic growth are more resilient and better equipped to deal with future adversities and stressful life events (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

Posttraumatic Growth in Offenders

In contrast to the extensive array of studies on posttraumatic growth in a variety of populations and situations (for an overview see Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006, 2013), posttraumatic growth among offenders and prisoners has not been studied very much. After scrutinizing data-bases such as PsycInfo and Google Scholar, we didn't find any articles that report on quantitative analysis regarding posttraumatic growth among offenders, except for a few studies focusing on political prisoners and prisoners of war. This is remarkable, particularly because the limited qualitative studies available, as well as some theoretical papers, suggest that both the committed offence and incarceration can challenge the offenders' global meanings and prompt a profound search

for meaning (Braswell & Wells, 2014; Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Maruna et al., 2006, Ronel & Elisha, 2011; Ronel & Segev, 2014, van Ginneken, 2014).

Qualitative studies confirmed that a search for meaning in therapy resulted in posttraumatic growth. One study used interpretative phenomenological analysis to analyze the reports of seven offenders about their therapeutic process. The researchers reported that the search for new meaning after committing the crime took a central role in the prisoners' therapeutic change (Ferrito et al., 2012). Mapham and Hefferon (2012) used inductive thematic analysis in a sample of twenty offenders who attended a therapeutic program, to study their experiences about the impact of the treatment. One of the recurrent reported themes was a positive shift of the offenders' sense of meaningfulness, and a higher appreciation of relationships and of life in general. The authors conclude that the positive shift in the offenders' perception of leading a more meaningful life could be understood as posttraumatic growth, and that this could be a key in desisting from crime.

In van Ginnenken's study, six female prisoners were interviewed about their current prison experience. They each experienced posttraumatic growth after coping with the initial entry shock of being imprisoned. Van Ginneken (2014) reported positive changes in the prisoners' self-perception, a higher sense of self-efficacy, and the emergence of new meanings. These prisoners experienced their incarceration as a turning point in their lives. Guse and Hudson (2014) describe in their qualitative study how ex-prisoners who made a successful re-entry into the society experienced posttraumatic growth during their incarceration. In their small sample (n = 3), prisoners developed new virtues and meanings as a reaction to their imprisonment,

such as the increased capacity to engage with people, a shift in self-perception, wisdom, persistence, and a changed philosophy of life. The interviewees were clear about the fact that these new strengths were crucial for them to reintegrate into the society. Guse & Hudson (2014) argued that posttraumatic growth includes different qualities that are known to improve the offenders' ability to desist from crime: enhanced relationships, important shifts in self-perception and self-awareness, and new meaning in life. These same qualities reflect also a pro-social way of meeting one's basic existential needs.

In a qualitative study of 38 imprisoned male sex offenders, Elisha et al. (2013) analyzed the changes that these prisoners experienced during their prison time. Most of the participants (30) experienced positive shifts in their attitudes towards their victims and a deeper understanding of the severity of their offences. These same prisoners experienced incarceration as an opportunity to change their lives. Crucial in this process of growth was the role of social acceptance in different kinds of human relationships. The acceptance of these relationships was marked, on one hand, by respect for the sex offender as a person but, on the other hand, also by asking the offender to take responsibility for the crime. This type of acceptance was a necessary condition for sex offenders to find the courage to deal with the consequences of incarceration, to face the consequences of their deeds, as well as to learn how to cope with the pain of their own experienced childhood abuse. The total process of change was marked by profound shifts in the quality of their relationships, new spiritual meanings, and personal changes.

The Treatment of Sex Offenders and the Process of Personal Change

An important difference between the reported process of posttraumatic growth in these qualitative studies and the aspired change in treatment programs of sex offenders is the fact that the process of posttraumatic growth arises from an inner necessity. The threat of global meanings is induced by an outside factor (e.g. the crime or incarceration) but the change process itself departs from an internal need to make sense of what happened and to find a new direction in life (Joseph, 2011; Park, 2010).

Specialized treatment programs for sex offenders on the other hand, are generally coerced group therapies and the participants of these programs often don't start with an inner necessity for change (Walji et al., 2013). Coercion can be disastrous for motivation, especially with offenders who often don't feel the need to change (Burrowes & Needs, 2009; Walji et al., 2013). A meta-analytic study showed that coercive therapies have lower outcomes than voluntary therapies with offenders (Parhar et al., 2008). As a consequence, motivating offenders to get involved in a change process has been a real issue in rehabilitation programs (Ward et al., 2007). More concretely, the lack of motivation of the clients and the program's failure to focus on the individual needs have been blamed for only minor therapeutic outcomes (Ward et al., 2007). In a meta-synthesis of qualitative studies on sex-offenders' experiences with therapy, Walji et al. (2013) found that a shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation was essential in generating therapeutic change.

As an answer to this problem, the Good Lives Model introduced a new rehabilitation framework which incorporated a different approach towards the etiology of sexual delinquency,

different ideas about the treatment of sex offenders and a different desired outcome of the treatment (Ward & Brown, 2004). As we mentioned, this model argues that the way sex offenders try to meet their basic existential needs often runs through antisocial behavior. Sexual delinquents might not be aware of the fact that they are searching to fulfill these basic needs. Distorted global meanings about themselves and others (e.g. 'children like sex') might also lead them to pursue the wrong goals to meet their needs (Ward et al., 2007). Sex offenders might also lack essential skills to achieve their basic existential needs in a pro-social way. More concretely, affective problems and attachment issues – which are common among sex offenders – make it harder for them to engage in stable adult relationships (Day, 2009; Howells et al., 2004; Jamieson & Marshall, 2000; Lyn & Burton, 2005, Ward et al., 2007). Cognitive distortions might also help sex offenders to deny their responsibility for the offence (e.g. 'She seduced me'), which makes reoffending in the future possible (Burn & Brown, 2006).

In line with these etiological assumptions, treatment focuses on reducing risk by targeting cognitive distortions, but also by optimizing the offenders' awareness and skills to achieve a more fulfilling life (Fortune et al., 2012). For the latter, Ward and his colleagues (2007) proposed an assessment of the offenders' desired basic existential needs, possible conflicts between these needs, and the (lack of) skills to meet these needs. In their vision, treatment should provide an opportunity to become aware of one's basic needs and values. Therapy should also provide ways to improve one's social skills and to strive for a change in one's narrative identity (Ward & Marshall, 2007). By adding a positive life project that focuses on a better and more meaningful future, the Good Lives Model offers a rehabilitation program that should

increase the motivation of the coerced participants (Ward et al., 2007).

In our opinion, joining and facilitating the process that leads to posttraumatic growth – which might be simmering on the surface but not be attended upon by the therapist – might increase the clients' intrinsic motivation and might even provide a straighter road to a change in one's narrative and purposes in life.

Integrating the Facilitation of Posttraumatic Growth

In general, therapy can facilitate the process that leads to posttraumatic growth by integrating a more experiential and existential approach (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). The experiential therapist attunes to the actual process and helps the client to change elements that might block this process. In the case of sex offenders, typical process blockages are a lack of contact with their inner experiences and an under- or over-regulation of emotions (Day, 2009; Gunst, 2012; Howells et al., 2004). Therapy can help the client by offering *expert companionship* in the form of deep empathic listening, emotion regulation, containment, experiential processing and by fostering an openness towards existential themes (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013).

To get attuned to the process that leads to posttraumatic growth, the therapist needs to listen to the experienced losses as a consequence of the crime, incarceration, and traumatic childhood experiences. On a content level, it is important to listen for global meanings that have been challenged by the distressing life experiences (e.g. "I thought I was a good person," "I thought she loved me," "I lost everything," "I wasted my life"). The therapist can help the client to access and articulate his or her own inner

experience regarding their losses (Joseph & Linley, 2006). Experiential exploration of these lost global meanings helps the client to engage into a deeper existential questioning about one's own identity, the significance of one's life and the future (Joseph, 2011). The therapist supports this existential questioning without imposing new meanings, but by granting space to mourn over the lost meanings and by being fully present as a companion (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). By processing the distressing life event in this way, the client starts to integrate these events into his or her narrative (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Subtle themes of growth need to be picked up by the therapist and need to be explored too (e.g. "I lost a lot of friends, but my relationship with my partner grew deeper," "the whole experience brought myself back to the essence," "I lost everything, I don't care that much anymore about material belongings"). By integrating both the losses and the new areas of possible growth, the client and the therapist engage in a forward moving process which leads to personal change and a reset of what really matters in life (Joseph & Linley, 2006).

Joining a process that leads to posttraumatic growth should increase both client's motivation and the therapy's efficacy. Elements of this process – such as attending traumatic childhood experiences and identity issues – have been found to be essential in increasing therapy engagement and therapeutic change in sex offenders (Walji et al., 2013). At the same time, these topics are often bypassed by forensic therapists (Walji et al, 2013). However, joining the process leading to posttraumatic growth demands the incorporation of a more experiential and existential approach. Rehabilitation programs that integrate such an approach are rare, but they exist (e.g. Gunst, 2012; Morgan & Winterowd, 2002; Pascual-Leone et al., 2011; Polizzi et al., 2014, Vanhooren, 2006,

2011). Gunst (2012) gives an example how experiential group therapy can be integrated within a relapse prevention program for sex offenders. The experiential part of the treatment leads to the creation of new meanings, more openness to experience and more fulfilling lives (Gunst, 2012).

More attention to posttraumatic growth and the implementation of experiential and existential attitudes and methods that facilitate posttraumatic growth could help accomplish the therapeutic goals described by the Good Lives Model. Within this framework, the occurrence of posttraumatic growth would mean that offenders found a different way to meet their basic existential needs. For therapists, the emergence of this kind of growth could be a sign that the offender moved along on his or her path to desistance. Knowing that posttraumatic growth only occurs after working through one's issues, which are brought out by life stress, it would be expected that the level of experienced distress would be lower once posttraumatic growth has occurred (Park, 2010). This would certainly be the case if posttraumatic growth would indicate that one's basic existential needs are being met better than before. Given that humanistic therapies are believed to be well-suited to fostering posttraumatic growth (Joseph et al., 2012), we would expect humanistic forensic therapies to enhance posttraumatic growth during therapy and result in lower levels of distress.

Aim of this Study

Given the lack of quantitative findings on posttraumatic growth among offenders (van Ginneken, 2014) and that qualitative studies showed posttraumatic growth to be associated with desired therapy outcomes among offenders

(Guse & Hudson, 2014; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; van Ginneken, 2014), this pilot-study aimed to investigate the relationship between posttraumatic growth, the experience of distress, and the duration of therapy in a sample of sexual offenders in on-going post-prison experiential group therapy.[9] Based on the existing theoretical models and the empirical findings in other populations (Park, 2010; Ward & Fortune, 2014), we hypothesized that the experience of posttraumatic growth will be negatively related to distress. We also expected a positive relationship between the duration of therapy and the level of posttraumatic growth. To test these hypotheses, we opted for a quantitative approach. Because posttraumatic growth among offenders is relatively under-studied, we augmented our study by incorporating qualitative group interviews to get a more in-depth understanding of posttraumatic growth in this sample. We were especially interested in the relationship between the content of posttraumatic growth, former prison experiences, and the on-going psychotherapy. In sum, we chose a mixed method design to enable us to (a) clarify and quantify the relationship between the experience of stress and posttraumatic growth and (b) investigate in more depth what the core themes are in this relationship according to the offenders themselves.

Methods

Participants

All participants were recruited from FIDES (*Forensisch Initiatief voor Deviante Seksualiteit*), a post-prison treatment program for sexual offenders, with an in- and out-patient

9 This study served as a pilot for a study on meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth in prisoners.

program in Belgium. The in-patient program (FIDES-R, PC St.-Amandus) and the out-patient program (FIDES-A, CGG Prisma) both include a double therapeutic track: the patients attend a cognitive relapse prevention program and a experiential group therapy. The goal of the experiential therapy is to stimulate self-reflection and experiential meaning-making. The experiential group therapy holds a space to work on the offenders' own traumatic experiences as well as to work on their 'offender' side. Clients are assigned to the in-patient or out-patient group depending on the seriousness of their offence (for example, exhibitionists are sent to the out-patient group, pedophiles to the in-patient residential group). All patients (n = 44) were invited to participate in the study with the exception of seven who were attending a special program for sexual offenders with a serious mental disability. Since this study served as a pilot for a broader prisoner study, another seven subjects were excluded because they didn't have any experience with incarceration. The study was conducted in November and December 2013.

The participants (n = 30) ranged from 20 to 70 years old (M=46.47 ; SD=10.78). All but one of the subjects were male. Their educational level was measured by their highest diploma: 17.2% finished only primary school, 51.7% finished secondary school, 27.6% graduated with a bachelor's degree and 3.4% had a postgraduate degree. In the group, 56.67% were attending the in-patient program; 43.33% were attending the out-patient program. Regarding their childhood experiences, 37.04% had been sexually abused, 44.44% had been physically violated, 51.85% witnessed violence at home, 48.15% were bullied at school while 14.82% reported not having experienced any of these traumatic experiences. All participants had been convicted for serious sexual assaults, ranging from exhibitionism to rape

to child abuse. More than two-thirds (66.70%) had been convicted and imprisoned one time. The rest were recidivists: 26.7% served two prison sentences, 3.3% served three times, and 3.3% were imprisoned four times or more. The time spent in prison for the most recent incarceration varied from 4 months to 216 months (M= 44.13 ; SD= 42.90). The time the subjects spent in therapy within FIDES ranged from one to 54 months (M= 20.38 ; SD= 15.45). A minority (20.00%) attended a form of therapy during their prison time.

Procedure

All participants received an explanatory letter about the purpose of the study. Their participation was fully voluntary and did not have any consequences regarding their involvement in the therapeutic program. There were no incentives given. All the identified patients volunteered to participate and all signed an informed consent document. The study consisted of a quantitative part focusing on posttraumatic growth, distress and the duration of therapy, and a qualitative part focusing on the content of the experienced growth, former prison experiences and the on-going therapy. With regard to the quantitative part, they completed the questionnaire at the in- or out-patient clinic. The questionnaires were anonymous, and the envelopes were sealed by the participants themselves. On average, the participants spent 30 minutes completing the questionnaire. Once the data-analysis was concluded, the participants were invited to reflect on the results of this study in three group debriefing sessions, which provided qualitative embellishment of the findings.

The informed consent letter, the questionnaire and the study itself were approved by the ethical commission of the University of Leuven (Belgium).

Measures

The *Posttraumatic Growth-Inventory* (PTG-I, Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), a widely used measure of posttraumatic growth, is a 21-item scale comprised of five subscales: New Possibilities (e.g. "I established a new path for my life"), Relating to Others (e.g. "I have a greater sense of closeness with others"), Personal Strength (e.g. "I know better that I can handle difficulties"), Spiritual Change (e.g. "I have a better understanding of spiritual matters"), and Appreciation of Life (e.g. "I can better appreciate each day"). Each item is scored on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 (*I did not experience this change as a result of my crisis*) to 5 *(I experienced this change to a very great degree as a result of my crisis*). Higher scores on the PTG-I indicate more growth. It has an internal consistency of .90 and a test-retest reliability of .71 (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Because no Dutch translation was available, a translation team (consisting of two native Dutch speakers and one native English speaker), provided a Dutch version of the scale. In our sample, the translated Dutch PTG-I had a Cronbach's Alpha of .91.

The *General Health Questionnaire-12* (GHQ-12) (Goldberg & Williams, 1988) is a widely used scale to measure psychological problems and stress, as well as the lack of well-being. The GHQ-12 has been shown to be a valid measure of distress and mental health in prison (Baumann et al., 2008; Hassan et al., 2011; Liebling et al., 2011; Sinha, 2010). The GHQ-12 consists of twelve items that are scored on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 to 4. The higher the score, the worse the mental state is. Examples of items are: "Have you recently felt constantly under strain," and "Have you recently lost much sleep over worry." The internal consistency of the scale ranges from .77 to .93, depending on the

study. In our study the Cronbach's alpha was .90.

Socio-demographic information obtained through the questionnaire included age, gender, level of education, amount of time in prison, and duration of therapy.

Qualitative interviews were done once the quantitative data-analysis was concluded. The participants were invited to reflect on the results of this study in a group debriefing session. All participants participated. In order to create more time, space and confidentiality for each participant to reflect on the results, we opted to split up the participants in three different focus groups. For practical reasons, the three already existing therapy groups were chosen as the best format for the qualitative interviews. The first group consisted of eight participants, the second group of ten, and the third group consisted of twelve participants. The participants were eager to join these group sessions; they had already been wondering about the results of the quantitative research.

The participants were asked to reflect freely on their experience of incarceration, the role of this therapy in their lives, the emergence or absence of posttraumatic growth, and the loss and emergence of new meanings. They were also invited to reflect on the distress they experienced during their incarceration and during therapy. These subjects were briefly introduced by the first author, who also facilitated the group process and helped the participants to explore the subjects in a deeper way (the first author is an experienced group facilitator and therapist himself).

Each group reflection session lasted two hours. Since the participants objected to being audio-taped, notes were taken during the sessions. At the end of each session, the researcher checked with the participants whether the notes of the session reflected the statements of the members and the group

process. The participants were invited to give feedback on these conclusions before the session finished. A phenomenological analysis (McLeod, 2011) was performed on the notes taken during the session, which resulted into identifying the themes that were commonly experienced by the participants.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

Preliminary analyses. Descriptive statistics of the study variables can be found in Table 1. Univariate analyses were conducted to investigate mean-level differences. With regard to socio-demographic variables, inmates who graduated high school reported significantly higher levels of posttraumatic growth (M = 3.57, SD = .61) than inmates who were college graduates (M= 2.48, SD= .72) (F(3,25)= 5.09, p < .01). The mean level of experienced psychological stress (F(3,25) = .87, *ns*) or of the duration of therapy (F(3,24) = .56, *ns*) did not differ between the achieved educational levels. Age was not related with any of the study variables (Table 2). With regard to imprisonment-related variables, no significant differences regarding the number of convictions were found on posttraumatic growth (F(3,26) = .87, *ns*), psychological stress (F(3,26) = .34, *ns*) or on duration of the therapy in FIDES (F(3,25) = .61, *ns*). Furthermore, no significant differences with regard to the number of in-prison sentences were found for posttraumatic growth (F(4,25) =.85, *ns*), psychological stress (F(4,25)=.81, *ns*) or duration of the therapy in FIDES (F(4,25)=.27, *ns*). Offenders who were already in therapy during incarceration showed significantly lower levels of psychological stress (M = 2.00, SD =.59) than their counterparts who were not in therapy in prison (M = 3.58, SD =

.12) ($F(1,28) = 13.83$, $p < .01$). No significant differences were found in posttraumatic growth ($F(1,28) = 2.38$, *ns*) although the concrete means seem to indicate a (non-significant) pattern with offenders who were in therapy during incarceration reporting higher levels of posttraumatic growth ($M = 3.20$, $SD = .76$) and those who were not enrolled in therapy in prison ($M = 2.35$, $SD = .44$). The small sample size might cause the non-significance. As expected, higher levels of psychological stress were significantly related to lower levels of posttraumatic growth. Duration of therapy was also significantly positively related to the level of posttraumatic growth (Table 2).

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Study Variable

	Mean	Std. Deviation
Duration therapy in months	20.38	15.45
Psychological stress	2.11	.70
Posttraumatic growth	3.15	.77

Table 2

Correlations between Age, Duration therapy, Posttraumatic Growthand Psychological Stress

	1.	2.	3.	4.
1. Age	1			
2. Duration therapy	-.03	1		
3. Posttraumatic Growth	-.03	.39*	1	
4. Psychological Stress	.14	-.25	-.51**	1

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

Table 3

Hierarchical regression predicting Posttraumatic Growth

Predictor	β Step 1	β Step 2	β Step 3
Gender	.25	.26	.25
Educational level	- .32	- .38*	- .39*
Duration of therapy		.29+	.33 *
Psychological stress		- .51**	- .54**
Interaction Stress and duration therapy			.11
Δ R^2	.17	.58**	.59 **

+p > .06, * p < .05, ** p < .01

Primary Analyses. Subsequent hierarchical analyses were performed with levels of posttraumatic growth as dependent variable (Table 3). In a first step, educational level and gender were entered as control variables in the prediction of posttraumatic growth. These variables, however, did not significantly predict posttraumatic growth (R^2 = .17, $F(2, 27) = 2.58$, *ns*). In a second step, standardized scores of psychological stress and duration of therapy were entered, which added significantly to the prediction of posttraumatic growth (R^2 = .58, $F(4, 27) = 7.96$, $p < .01$). This was due to the significant negative effect of psychological stress ($\beta = -.51$, $p < .01$). Duration of therapy, on the other hand, showed a marginal positive effect in the prediction of posttraumatic

growth, failing, however, to reach significance ($\beta = .29$, $p = .05$). In a final step, the interaction between psychological stress and therapy duration was entered but did not reach significance ($R^2 = .59$, $\beta = .11$, *ns*).

Qualitative Analysis

A phenomenological analysis was performed on the notes that were taken during the three group sessions. We used the *Duquesne method* (McLeod, 2011) which proposes a stepwise phenomenological analysis: extraction of significant statements of the participants, elimination of irrelevant information, identification of central meanings implicit in the statements, and integration of the meanings into a single description of the phenomenon. The following central themes were identified: prison experiences and emerging posttraumatic growth (emotional support, appreciation of life, purpose in life, and personal change), integrating and deepening posttraumatic growth during post-prison therapy, and the current experienced posttraumatic growth.

Prison experiences and emerging posttraumatic growth. The participants took the opportunity to vent about their past prison experiences. As such, incarceration was primarily experienced as highly negative, but it challenged them to change in one way or another.

Alex[10], a 50 year old man gave a typical example of his prison time: "You lose everything... your dignity, your self-confidence, your job and many so-called friends. I also felt constantly scared.

10 In order to guarantee the participants' anonymity, we changed their first names and a few details.

I was literally chased by other prisoners. I was often looking behind me if nobody would attack me, which happened in fact a couple of times. The guards knew what was happening but they didn't intervene. The only thing I could do was surviving and reminding myself that I would be free one day."

The experience Alex had in prison was not exceptional. In each reflection group, there were participants who gave similar examples of their prison experience. Their testimonies remind us of many qualitative studies that have described the entry shock of incarceration, which is often accompanied with anxiety, a loss of control, a loss of relationships, and a loss of self (Liebling & Maruna, 2011). As an answer to these experiences, participants started to question themselves and embarked on an existential search for what was essential to them in life. Alex continued: "Eventually I started to ask myself the question, why on earth I had to stay alive. I also started to think about the past and about what really mattered to me in life."

As a result of this existential questioning, important changes were initiated during their prison time such as a deeper appreciation of relationships, a deeper appreciation of life, and a shift in purposes and meaning in life.

For example, the experience of incarceration helped the offenders to value more deeply the *emotional support* of others important in their lives, such as family members and agents, which helped them to cope with prison. George, a 60-year old man expressed his gratitude for his wife during this imprisonment: "Without her constant support and her visits, I wouldn't have survived this hell. I lived from visit to visit; it was the only thing to look forward to. Since then, I really started to appreciate her and I had the feeling that I finally got to know her better. Too bad this had to happen first." Marc also appreciated the support of some

guards and therapists: “There was one guard who took some time for me now and then. He asked me how I was doing and he was really interested in me. He gave me the feeling that I was still a human being. Afterwards I realized how important it is to take care of other people. Not for your own interest, but for the sake of the other.”

At the same time people became more important as a goal to live for: moments of despair and humiliation during incarceration became bearable because the participants felt they had to go on for the sake of their loved ones. Another aspect in the social realm that emerged during incarceration was the importance of being able to help other people, as a way of having something and some-one to live for. Phillip told us how crucial it was for him to help an inmate with whom he shared his prison cell: “He was an older man and he had physical problems. He was not able to carry any weight and couldn’t even tie his shoes. For me, it was almost a gift that I could help him. It felt that I still meant something for another person and that my life was not totally meaningless.”

Some participants articulated that they *appreciated life* more fully. For example, they enjoyed the ‘little pleasures’ of life now, like walking at the beach or in nature. Ali explained how he was looking forward to do small things when he was set free, which would have felt trivial before he was imprisoned: “I was really looking forward to walk along the seashore, or even just to walk in and out my house and to leave the backdoor open. I also wanted to taste simple dishes that reminded me of my childhood or to sit in my backyard.”

Besides the importance of relationships as a purpose in life, some participants also found new *purposes*. Some made plans to go to university or to take a different job. Remarkably,

some participants saw the opportunity to stop the cycle of intergenerational sexual abuse as an important goal in life. Bart explained how this was his purpose in life: "It became clear to me that I had to stop this cycle. I was sexually abused by my father, but he never acknowledged that he actually abused me. The only way to stop this cycle of abuse was to admit that I abused my son and to take responsibility for it. I don't want him to go through the same feeling as I did. Interrupting this cycle of abuse in our family is the most important goal in my life."

There was a difference between group members who had joined some form of therapy during incarceration and those who hadn't (often because there was no therapy available in the institution where they were incarcerated). Those who were in therapy during their incarceration experienced their prison time as more meaningful, less stressful, and less harmful than did the others. They also experienced forms of *personal change*. Bart expressed that the fact that he already started with therapy and self-analysis during incarceration made him feel that he used that time well: "I have the feeling that I really used my time well in prison. I immediately asked for therapy, and I read a lot of books about sexual abuse while I was waiting for my therapy to start. Slowly, I started to gain more insight in who I really was and how everything went wrong. It is weird, but as I gained insight and started to see differently, I also had the feeling that guards were better for me and that people looked at me through a different lens."

It is remarkable that the participants' experiences of growth during their incarceration were very intertwined with their experiences of loss and suffering. In a way, this makes their growth indeed 'posttraumatic' or stress-related. It also suggests that this kind of change wouldn't have occurred without the

experience of loss. One of the participants suggested: “It is weird. Prison was one of the worst episodes in my life, but at the same time, it gave me the opportunity to change for the better.”

Integrating and deepening posttraumatic growth during post-prison therapy. A second theme that arose in the group reflections was that post-prison therapy accelerated the growth process and deepened the changes that were already emerging during incarceration. Specifically, the changes in prison emerged from a necessity to survive the daily challenges. Once in therapy after incarceration, there was time to integrate these changes into the prisoners' personalities and future life plans. The participants emphasized the importance of acknowledging and confronting the crime. Joseph was very clear: “If you're not honest with yourself, there is no reason to sit here. It is not easy though. It is very hard, but it is the only way. Once you made that step, you feel relieved and you can finally start to build up yourself and your life again.” Thierry added that facing one's own childhood traumas was equally important: “I was really scared to talk about my own abuse, but by going through those experiences again, it became clear to me how much it determined my life. I also became aware of how my victims must have suffered.”

The participants were clear about the importance of accepting the full responsibility for their crimes. It shifted their attitude towards their therapy and they became intrinsically motivated and more personally involved in therapy. It changed their perception of their own past and future and it accelerated the therapeutic process. This resulted in more posttraumatic growth, especially by providing personal insight and through changed interactions with other people. For example, Jonas noticed that he was more able to listen to other people because of the therapy.

All the participants experienced decreased stress levels as therapy moved forward and as they experienced growth, but this didn't occur in a linear fashion. At times, therapy itself became a source of stress, especially when they opened up to talk about their crimes or about their previous childhood experiences of abuse and physical violation.

Experienced posttraumatic growth at the current moment. The participants reported different areas of posttraumatic growth as a result of their incarceration and their therapy. Posttraumatic growth was experienced in changes in their self-narratives and self-knowledge ("I know better who I am now;" "I know now what led myself to do these things"), in taking responsibility for their own crime ("You need to be honest with yourself and acknowledge that you did it;" "I want to take responsibility for the abuse because that's important for my victim;" "Being in therapy is taking responsibility"), in a deeper appreciation of relationships ("My family is my top priority;" "Without the support of my wife and this group, I would never have come this far"), and in changed purposes in life ("I want to work now and lead an honest life;" "I want to study;" "I don't care that much anymore for material belongings, it is who you are and your relationships that count"). Interestingly, the participants enjoyed talking about posttraumatic growth. Alex expressed it this way: "Actually, it is nice to talk about the growth. I have the feeling that this put things in a different perspective. Talking together about growth and about what matters in life makes me thinking." Reflecting on these experiences of growth by the participants was mostly accompanied by feelings of hope, relief and the belief that their lives were not fully wasted after all.

Discussion

In a sample of 30 sex offender, posttraumatic growth was studied with a sequential research design offering quantitative data as well as in depth, qualitative insight. Within this pilot-study, our hypotheses with regard to psychological stress and posttraumatic growth were confirmed. We found that higher levels of posttraumatic growth were associated with lower levels of psychological stress. We also found a pattern positively associating posttraumatic growth with the duration of the therapy, but this association failed to reach significance which might be due to our small sample. Offenders who were in therapy during incarceration – prior to the current therapy – showed lower levels of psychological distress during their current therapy, but they didn't show a higher level of posttraumatic growth.

From a theoretical perspective, the fact that posttraumatic growth is negatively related to psychological stress seems to underscore one of the basic tenets of humanistic, existential approaches and the Good Lives Model regarding offenders (Polizzi et al., 2014; Ronel & Elisha, 2011; Vanhooren, 2006, 2011; Ward & Brown, 2004). These approaches predict that when offenders meet their basic existential needs in a more adjusted way, their experience of psychological stress will be lower. Posttraumatic growth is experienced when people meet these needs in a new way. In our sample, higher levels of posttraumatic growth were indeed associated with less psychological stress, which could mean that these offenders found a new way to relate to their basic existential needs. This was confirmed by the qualitative data that we gathered during the debriefing sessions. For example, the participants explained how family became more important to them, how they appreciated the support of group members and

other people, how it became important to take care of others, and how they tried to give a new direction to their lives. These experiences of posttraumatic growth were accompanied by feelings of hope, relief and the belief that their lives were not fully wasted after all.

The feedback of the participants on the interaction of stress and the duration of therapy was very clarifying. As therapists often experience, the interaction of psychological stress, growth and the therapeutic process is not a straight story. The participants explained how the therapeutic process itself is at certain moments a source of stress. For example, as the therapeutic process evolves, the offender's ability to face his crimes and the consequences grows. This confrontation initially elicits psychological stress, before the client finds a way to live with this truth. This may explain why the interaction of the duration of therapy and psychological stress doesn't predict posttraumatic growth.

Participants who were in therapy during incarceration explained how therapy in prison helped them to experience their incarceration as a more meaningful time, which reduced the stress experienced in prison. They saw their prison time as less harmful compared to those who didn't get help. They experienced their current therapy as a continuation of the therapeutic process that started during their incarceration.

In many ways the findings of this pilot-study confirmed the results of previous qualitative studies on posttraumatic growth with sex offenders and offenders in general. Consistent with the earlier studies, we found signs of changes in the appreciation of relationships and personal growth and in shifts in meanings and purposes in life. Interestingly, the participants in our sample put a lot of emphasis on the importance of emotional support during

their incarceration, which confirms the findings of Elisha et al. (2013). In their qualitative study with sex offenders, acceptance relationships were experienced as the crux to change. We also found that relationships were experienced as an important source of meaning in life. This is not different from the general population. Relationships play a major role in experience meaning in life (Stillman et al., 2009). This only confirms the role of meaningful relationships as a basic existential need. Our qualitative study also confirmed the earlier findings that for those prisoners who experience posttraumatic growth, prison itself is experienced as a turning point in life. Earlier qualitative research pointed out that incarceration is often experienced as a place where their global meanings about themselves, the others and the world are being challenged (Braswell & Wells, 2014; Guse & Hudson, 2014; Maruna et al., 2006; van Ginneken, 2014). This is completely in line with the research of posttraumatic growth over different populations: posttraumatic growth only occurs in individuals whose lives are markedly disrupted by a stressful life event (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). We also confirmed the earlier findings of Elisha et al. (2013) about the importance of taking responsibility for the committed crime as a form of posttraumatic growth. We found that the participants experienced the acceptance of their responsibility to be a source of growth: it shifted their attitude towards their therapy and their perception of their personal past and their own future. Acknowledging their responsibility increased their involvement in therapy and deepened their posttraumatic growth considerably.

Much harder to interpret is our finding of a negative association between education and posttraumatic growth. In some studies with cancer-patients and HIV-patients, higher education and socio-economic status were positively associated

with posttraumatic growth (Stanton et al., 2006; Milam, 2006). In a study on posttraumatic growth with political prisoners, higher educational levels were also associated with higher rates of posttraumatic growth (Salo et al., 2005). Since the qualitative studies on posttraumatic growth and offenders didn't include any information about the educational levels of the offenders, we don't know if our findings suggest a trend in offender populations or not.

Limitations

Our pilot-study on posttraumatic growth has certain limitations that should be taken into account. Our sample size was small, which limited the possibilities of statistical analysis. The research was cross-sectional, which made it impossible to search for causal relationships and for effects of variables over time. Another limitation was that all the measures were self-reported. We could have compared the self-reported results of the participants with reports about these participants by the group therapists, but this might have endangered the confidentiality of the study. Another limitation is our study didn't include a control group, which makes it impossible to compare the results with sex offenders who didn't receive any therapy.

Taking these limitations into account, the results of this pilot study provide a first indication of important relationships between posttraumatic growth and psychological stress among offenders, and they point in directions for further research. More work is needed to clarify the meaning-making processes that lead to posttraumatic growth in this population of sex offenders, the therapeutic process that accompanies growth, and the relationship between posttraumatic growth and desistance from crime.

Conclusions

Posttraumatic growth has been described as the positive outcome of processing important losses of meaning caused by stressful life events (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In our sample, we discovered that incarceration was experienced by all participants as a distressing life experience, and that existential questioning arose from this experience. We found that higher levels of posttraumatic growth were associated with lower levels of psychological stress. Therapy helped the participants to integrate new perspectives and meanings in their narrative, and to shape their life in a more pro-social way. These outcomes correspond to the anticipated results of newer rehabilitation models. For example, the Good Live Model aims for a new redemptive self-narrative, new values and purposes in life, and new ways to meet one's basic existential needs (Ward & Marshall, 2007). Facilitating posttraumatic growth can help to increase intrinsic motivation, therapy engagement and the achievement of the therapy goals.

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Chapter 5

Profiles of Meaning and Search for Meaning among Prisoners

Siebrecht Vanhooren, Mia Leijssen, & Jessie Dezutter[11]

Abstract

Meaning in life and searching for meaning are central in how people organize their life and deal with various challenges during their life (Steger, 2012). Studies on meaning and the search for meaning among prisoners are virtually nonexistent. Based on the presence of meaning in their lives and on their search for meaning, we discovered four different profiles in a sample of 365 prisoners: *High Presence High Search*, *High Presence Low Search*, *Low Presence High Search*, and *Low Presence Low Search*. Prisoners with profiles that were marked by higher levels of meaning experienced less distress, more positive world assumptions, higher levels of self-worth, and more care for others compared to prisoners with low meaning profiles. Older prisoners and prisoners who were sexually abused during childhood were more represented in the profile that was marked by extremely low levels of meaning and low levels of search for meaning.

11 Vanhooren, S., Leijssen, M., & Dezutter, J. (Under Review). Profiles of Meaning and Search for Meaning among Prisoners. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*.

Introduction

Martha[12], a 57-year old-female prisoner, had been incarcerated for fifteen years now. Reflecting on her prison experiences, Martha explained how she struggled with feelings of hopelessness. In her daily solitude she fought against the temptation of committing suicide. One of the things that kept her going was her personal knitting-project. With the help of a chaplain her knitted bunnies were sold outside prison and the profit went entirely to an orphanage in Eastern Europe. Martha strongly asserted that as long as she could mean something to another person, life was still worth living.[1]

Martha's story reminds us of Viktor Frankl's original study about the fundamental need for experiencing and searching for meaning in life (1959/2006). Frankl argues that in the most horrible circumstances, having a purpose and meaning in life are decisive in one's chances of surviving. Although the situation in Western European prisons are hardly comparable with Frankl's experiences in the concentration camps during the second World War, having something or someone to live for might be an important resource for prisoners to cope with the daily distress of (life in) prison (Maruna et al., 2006). Within the limited possibilities of prison, Martha searched for and created a new way to experience meaning in her life.

Qualitative studies have described that some prisoners experience an existential crisis caused by being imprisoned and

12 "Martha" is a pseudonym for a female prisoner in the context of a qualitative study on meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth in prison. Martha signed an informed-consent document. The document and this study were approved by the Ethical Commission of the University of Leuven.

by committing a crime. As a consequence some of them search for new meaning, acquire a new sense of meaning in life and a set of self-transcendent values (Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014; Maruna et al., 2006; Vanhooren et al., 2015; van Ginneken, 2014). Other studies have argued that there are also prisoners whose meaning in life does not change as a consequence of incarceration, and who do not search for meaning during their prison time (Mandhouj et al., 2014).

However, quantitative studies that offer a more overall picture on experiencing meaning and searching for meaning among offenders and prisoners seem to be virtually nonexistent. Compared with the extensive array of studies on meaning in a variety of populations and situations in the last two decades (Hicks & Routledge, 2013; Markman et al., 2013; Wong, 2012), this is most remarkable.

Profiles of Experiencing Meaning and Searching for Meaning in the General Population

In general, *presence of meaning* has been defined as the individual perception of his or her life being significant, purposeful and valuable (Steger et al., 2006). People experience meaning when they comprehend the world, when they understand their place in the world and when they can identify what they want to accomplish in life (Steger et al., 2008). The *search for meaning* can be understood as the individual's desire and effort to establish or increase their understanding and experience of meaning in their lives (Steger et al., 2008). Higher levels of presence of meaning have recurrently been associated with positive well-being, lower levels of distress, and better health outcomes (for an overview, see Steger, 2012). The links between the search for meaning and

well-being have been less clear (Steger, 2013). In some studies, a search for meaning was found to be related to a lower level of well-being whereas other studies yielded mixed results (Steger, 2013). Steger et al. (2008) discovered that searching for meaning was related to rumination and depression, but also to openness and curiosity. Cohen and Cairs (2012) found that presence of meaning moderated the stress that accompanied a search for new meanings. This suggests that the presence of meaning and search for meaning interact in individuals, and that the interplay of these facets of meaning is hard to understand if they are studied separately.

Recently, researchers have adopted a new approach to understand the relationship between people's experience of meaning in life, and their efforts to search for meaning. Instead of focusing on the experience of meaning and the search for meaning as separate variables, scholars became more interested in how meaning and a search for meaning were connected within people and how different configurations of meaning and search for meaning were related to various outcomes on well-being and stress (Cohen & Cairs, 2012; Dezutter et al., 2013). This new approach has been called *person-oriented* and is distinct from the variable-oriented approach that is commonly used in statistical analyses (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997). Whereas the variable-approach studies such factors as the presence of meaning in life and individuals' search for meaning separately, the person-oriented approach focuses on how these variables are interconnected and organized within the person. The unit of analysis of the person-oriented approach is not the variable itself, but the configurations or patterns of the variables that emerge from the data collected (Bergman & Lundh, 2015).

Studies that applied a person-oriented approach have found

distinct patterns or profiles in how people relate to meaning and a search for meaning (Dezutter et al., 2013, 2014, 2015). For example, in emerging adults (*N* = 8,492) five different profiles were found in terms of scores on meaning and scores on searching for meaning in life (Dezutter et al., 2014). One profile could be identified by its high scores on both presence and search for meaning, whereas another profile was characterized by high scores on presence of meaning but low scores on search for meaning. A third profile was discovered with low scores of presence of meaning and a fourth one with both low scores on presence and search for meaning. Finally, a fifth profile emerged with undifferentiated scores on both dimensions. By applying a person-oriented approach, this study highlighted the diversity and complexity of how young adults relate to the presence and search for meaning in their lives, which would not have been possible through a classical variable approach.

Meaning and Search for Meaning among Prisoners in Qualitative Studies

Qualitative studies have described how incarceration can cause a loss of meaning in life for the prisoner, which is accompanied by a deep personal crisis. As a result, prisoners are challenged to embark on a search for new meanings (Ferrito et al., 2012, Maruna et al., 2006, Vanhooren et al., 2015; van Ginneken, 2014). As in the general population, higher levels of meaning would also be associated with lower levels of distress among offenders and prisoners. In a pilot-study with French prisoners, the presence of meaning in life was significantly lower compared to the general population, but within the sample of this study, higher levels of meaning were found to be related to lower

levels of distress (Mandhouj et al., 2013).

Unfortunately, these studies did not distinguish different meaning-profiles among prisoners. An exception is the detailed study conducted by Maruna (2001). Maruna (2001) analyzed the narratives of interviews conducted with 50 ex-prisoners. The main purpose of this research was to study differences between offenders who successfully desisted from crime and offenders who persisted in crime. Remarkably, no differences were found in their socio-demographic background, in their crimes, the amount of committed crimes, or in their personality structure. One of the main differences between desisting and persisting offenders was the fact that they showed distinct profiles vis-à-vis meaning. Interestingly, persistent offenders were not likely to search for meaning. Maruna (2001) described their experience of meaning in life as "empty" and self-centered. Their life purposes reflected this emptiness through the pursuit of hedonic happiness, such as hyper-consumption and sensorial thrills. Making life choices and taking responsibility for their own lives were avoided by this group.

Meaning in the desisting group, however, was marked by a search for meaning, and the desire to accomplish self-transcending purposes, to contribute to larger causes and to care for others (e.g. volunteer work). This group had also experienced emptiness in the past, but their experience of meaning had changed, primarily caused by the fact that they had an experience where someone "believed" in them. The experience of being "seen" by another person and being truly valued prompted the onset of a profound process of change. This process involved an internal search for meaning, during which their inner sense of self and their purpose in life were recalibrated. As a result they experienced a higher sense of meaning in life, which was

accompanied by higher levels of self-worth and the belief that they could change their destiny.

Although Maruna (2001) did not apply a person-oriented methodology, his qualitative study suggests that there were two distinguishable profiles of meaning and search for meaning in his sample. The first profile could be identified by its low levels of presence of meaning, and low levels of search for meaning. This hypothetical profile would have been associated with recidivism, lower levels of self-worth and lower levels of care for others. The second profile could be identified by its high levels of meaning and higher levels of search for meaning. This profile would have been associated with desistance from crime, higher levels of self-worth and more care for others.

Assumptions about the Self, Others, and the World

As qualitative studies on prisoners have demonstrated, there is a clear relationship between the experience of meaning, the active search for meaning, self-worth, self-transcendent values, and a positive attitude towards others (Guse & Hudson, 2012; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Maruna, 2001, van Ginneken, 2012). In the general population, self-worth has been found to be an important source of meaning (Baumeister, 1991). Connectedness with others is also found to be closely linked with feelings of meaningfulness (Stillman et al., 2009). A recent study on sources of meaning discovered that adults in the Western world especially derive meaning from personal growth and family involvement (Delle Fave et al., 2013). The connection between people's experience of meaning, their sense of worth, their perception of others and the world has been studied closely by Janoff-Bulman (1992). Janoff-Bulmann (1992) and Park (2010)

argue that people's experience of meaning is usually built upon assumptions about the self, others and the world, which form their personal meaning system. These assumptions are basic schemes through which individuals understand or give meaning to themselves and to the world. Schemes like these are usually shaped during childhood and most people seem to develop positive assumptions about life. More specifically, people usually have a positive sense of self, and they experience the world as mostly benevolent and meaningful (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

However, people who are raised in an unsafe environment might have very different basic assumptions compared with the general population. Several studies discovered that a vast majority of the prison population is raised in highly stressful environments, with a high occurrence of child abuse, neglect, and violence (Gibson, 2011; Grella et al., 2013; Harner & Riley, 2013). In a pilot study with young prisoners (N = 38), the World Assumption Scale (WAS) (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) was used to measure three central world assumptions: self-worth, perceived benevolence of others, and the meaningfulness of the world (Maschi et al., 2010). Cumulative trauma prior to imprisonment was significantly correlated with lower scores on the WAS, and most specifically with rather negative assumptions about the meaningfulness of the world (Maschi et al., 2010). This relationship was confirmed in another sample (N = 58) with adult prisoners (Maschi & Gibson, 2012).

The fact that world assumptions are part of one's meaning system raises the question of whether distinct profiles in meaning and search for meaning among prisoners would also be associated with differences in these assumptions about one's self, others and the world. Similarly, since world assumptions are based upon childhood experiences and life events, one could

ask whether differences in the experience of meaning and search for meaning would also be linked to experiences of violence during childhood.

Aim of the Study

Recently, qualitative studies have shown interest in the presence of meaning and search for meaning among prisoners and offenders (Ferrito et al., 2012; Maruna, 2001, Maruna et al., 2006; Vanhooren et al., 2015). Through a qualitative methodology, Maruna (2001) identified two distinct meaning profiles (Low Presence Low Search, and High Presence High Search) which were differently related to self-worth, care for others and desistance from crime. Analyzing possible profiles among prisoners could offer us a more nuanced understanding of the range of ways prisoners experience meaning and search for meaning and how these within-group differences are related to diverse outcomes.

In this study, we aim to identify meaning profiles in a quantitative way in order to (a) replicate the profiles found in qualitative studies, and (b) explore if these profiles are indeed distinctive from each other with respect to distress in prison, variables that distinguish desisting offenders from persisting offenders (self-worth, and care for others), assumptions about the self, the other and the world, and the experience of violence during childhood.

Based on earlier studies on meaning-in-life profiles in other populations such as emerging adults and chronically ill patients (Dezutter et al., 2013; Dezutter et al., 2014), we expect at least four meaning profiles to exist among prisoners: (a) a cluster of prisoners who experience high levels of presence of meaning and

high levels of search for meaning (High Presence High Search), (b) a cluster of prisoners who experience high levels of presence of meaning but low levels of search for meaning (High Presence Low Search), (c) a cluster of prisoners who report low levels of presence of meaning, but high levels of search for meaning (Low Presence High Search) and finally (d) a cluster who scores low on both presence and search for meaning (Low Presence Low Search).

Method

Procedure

A cross-sectional study with a final sample of 365 prisoners was performed at three prisons in Belgium (Brugge, Ieper and Ruislede). All Dutch-speaking prisoners who were available were invited to participate. The first author had a brief contact with each prisoner in order to explain the purpose of the study. Prisoners who were willing to participate signed an informed consent document. In order to protect the privacy of the prisoners, the first author personally collected the completed questionnaire in an anonymous sealed envelope. In this way, the information was not shared with the prison staff and maximum confidentiality was guaranteed. The informed consent document and the study itself were approved by the ethical commission of the University of Leuven (Belgium) and by the Belgian General Directory of prison institutions.

Across the three prisons there were 490 available Dutch-speaking prisoners who were invited to participate. The informed consent document was signed by 427 prisoners; 411 handed the sealed envelope to the researcher (response rate: 96.25%). The returned envelopes contained 46 blank (or almost blank)

questionnaires, which were omitted from the study. In the end, the questionnaires of 365 prisoners (85.84%) were used in this study. The study was conducted from March 2014 until July 2014.

Participants

In our sample 312 prisoners (85.50%) were male, and 53 (14.50%) were female prisoners. The mean age of the participants was 40.01 years (SD 12.42). The educational level was assessed by the highest diploma: 27.7% finished only primary school, 58.2% finished secondary school, 8.3% graduated with a bachelor's degree and 5.8% graduated with a master's degree. The majority of the participants (53.70%) experienced violence during their childhood. More specifically, 16.30% of the participants were sexually abused (with or without physical violence), 17.10% experienced physical violence (without sexual violence, with or without witnessing violence at home and being bullied at school), 13.10% witnessed violence at home (without being sexually or physically violated) and 7.10% were bullied at school (without being sexually or physically violated).

Measures

The *Meaning in Life questionnaire* (MLQ) (Steger et al., 2006) has been used in many studies to assess presence of meaning as well as the active search for meaning (Steger, 2013). The questionnaire has two subscales, Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning. Confirmatory factor analyses in multiple populations revealed a two-factor structure and good internal consistency (Steger et al., 2006). Each subscale consists of five

items and is scored on a 5-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1 (*Absolutely untrue*) to 5 (*Absolutely true*) (e.g. "I understand my life's meaning" for the Presence of Meaning subscale and "I am looking for something that makes my life feel meaningful" for the Search for Meaning subscale). Cronbach's Alpha of the Presence of Meaning subscale in our sample was .86 and .85 for the Search for Meaning subscale. Because no Dutch translation was available, a team of four researchers worked on a translation through consensus and back-translation into English.

The *General Health Questionnaire – 12* (GHQ-12) (Goldberg & Williams, 1988) is a widely used scale to measure psychological problems and distress. The GHQ-12 is a valid measure of distress and mental health in prison (Baumann et al., 2008; Hassan et al., 2011; Liebling et al., 2011; Sinha, 2010). The GHQ-12 consists of twelve items that are scored on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 4 (*Much more than usual*). The higher the score, the higher the experienced distress. Examples of items are: "Have you recently felt constantly under strain?" and "Have you recently lost much sleep over worry?" The internal consistency of the scale ranges from .77 to .93, depending on the study. In our study the Cronbach's alpha was .83.

The *World Assumption Scale* (WAS) (Janoff-Bulman, 1989) is an instrument that assesses a person's basic assumptions about one's self, the benevolence of others or the world, and the sense of the world being a meaningful place. The WAS consists of 32 items and is scored on a 6-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1(*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*). The WAS has an overall score and three subscale scores of Worthiness of Self (e.g. "I have a low opinion of myself"), Benevolence of the World (e.g. "People are basically kind and helpful"), Meaningfulness of the World (e.g. "People's misfortunes result from mistakes they have

made"). Prior studies found Cronbach's alpha of the total WAS ranging from .67 to .78 (Janoff-Bulman, 1989, Maschi & Gibson, 2012, Maschi et al., 2010). In prisoner populations Cronbach's alpha of the total WAS was .74 (Maschi & Gibson, 2012). In our sample Cronbach's alpha was .81. For the subscale Worthiness of Self Cronbach's alpha was .76, for Meaningfulness of the World .76, and for Benevolence of the World .79. Because no Dutch translation was available, a translation team (consisting of two native Dutch speakers and one native English speaker), provided a Dutch version of the scale.

The *Spiritual Attitude and Involvement List* (SAIL) (De Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012) is a questionnaire that assesses spirituality among religious and nonreligious people. The SAIL consists of seven subscales. In this study, we only used the subscale Care for Others which consists of four items. These are scored on a 6-point Likert-scale, ranging from 1 (*Not at all*) to 6 (*To a very high degree*) (e.g. "I am receptive to other people's suffering"). In general, the SAIL shows satisfactory discriminant validity, low social desirability and Cronbach's alpha of the subscales varies between .73 and .86 (De Jager Meezenbroek et al., 2012). In our sample the subscale Care for Others had a Cronbach's alpha of .80.

Demographic information was obtained through the self-reported questionnaire regarding gender, age, level of education, prison institution, and traumatic experiences during childhood.

Analytical Strategy

All analyses are performed in SPSS 22. First, Pearson correlations were calculated between demographical variables (age, educational level, traumatic childhood experiences), and the

study variables (Meaning in Life, Search for Meaning, Distress, World Assumptions, Meaningfulness of the World, Benevolence of the World, Worthiness of Self and Care for Others). In addition to the multivariate and correlational preliminary analyses, a person-oriented approach (Bergman & Magnusson, 1997) was used to study within-person interactions and to identify occurring patterns based on two dimensions of meaning: Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning. Cluster analysis was used to examine occurring meaning profiles. Scores on Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning were standardized in *z* scores within the sample, and these were used for the cluster analyses.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

All correlations among the study variables are presented in Table 1. Presence of Meaning (M = 3.60, SD = 1.02) and Search for Meaning (M = 3.32, SD = 1.19) were not related, but Meaning in Life was positively related to World Assumptions (M = 3.61, SD = .56) and its three subscales, Worthiness of Self (M = 3.71, SD = .77), Meaningfulness of the World (M = 3.55, SD = .77) and Benevolence of the World (M = 3.55, SD = .92). Presence of Meaning was also positively related with Care for Others (M = 4.42, SD = 1.01) and negatively related with distress (M = 2.79, SD = .63). Search for Meaning was only positively correlated with the subscale Meaningfulness of the World and Care for Others. World Assumptions was positively related with all scales except for Search for Meaning, and negatively correlated with distress. Care for Others was positively related with all scales, expect with distress were no significant correlations were found.

As for demographic variables, age was not related to the study variables, except for a positive correlation with Benevolence of the World and Care for Others. Educational level was not related to any of the study variables. Traumatic experiences in childhood were positively related to distress, but negatively related to World Assumptions, Worthiness of Self and Benevolence of the World.

Oneway Anovas were performed to detect gender differences and differences between traumatic childhood experiences on our study variables. Gender differences were found by analyzing mean-levels of World Assumptions (F (1, 364) = 8.41, p <.01), Benevolence of the World (F (1, 355) = 7.03, p <.01), and Worthiness of Self (F (1, 353) = 7.90, p < .01), with higher scores for male prisoners every time. Other gender differences were found by analyzing mean-levels of traumatic experiences in childhood (F (1, 349) = 25.26, p < .001), this time with higher levels of traumatic experiences in female prisoners.

Differences in mean-levels on the World Assumptions were also found depending on childhood traumatic experiences, with lower levels of World Assumptions (F (4, 340) = 8.13, p < .001), Benevolence of the World (F (4, 341) = 4.53, p < .01) and Worthiness of Self (F (4, 339) = 6.78, p < .001) among prisoners with traumatic childhood experiences. Neither gender differences nor differences in traumatic childhood experiences were found in the other study variables.

Table 1

Correlations of the Study Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1.Presence of Meaning	1							
2.Search for Meaning	- .01	1						
3.Distress	- .39***	.03	1					
4.World Assumptions	.45***	.05	- .40***	1				
5.Worthiness of Self	.51***	- .02	- .50***	.66***	1			
6.Meaningfulness of the World	.18**	.19***	- .10	.66***	.19***	1		
7.Benevolence of the World	.24***	- .10	- .23***	.77***	.39***	.12*	1	
8.Care for Others	.31***	.11*	- .08	.29***	.20***	.12*	.30***	1

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p <.001$ (2-tailed).
Listwise N=342

One hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed to determine the relative importance of gender and traumatic childhood experiences on World Assumptions. Gender was entered as a control variable in Step 1. Gender predicted World Assumptions ($\beta = -.17$, $p < .01$), $R^2 = .03$, $F(1, 339) = 10.30$, $p < .01$. In Step 2, we entered traumatic experiences in childhood, $\Delta R^2 = .06$, $F(1, 338) = 23.37$, $p < .001$. Interestingly, by adding traumatic experiences ($\beta = .26$, $p < .001$), gender differences were no longer significant in predicting World Assumptions ($\beta = -.10$, *ns)*.

Primary Analyses

Cluster analyses were conducted on the Presence of Meaning and the Search for Meaning dimensions. Scores were standardized within the total sample, and these standardized scores served as input variables for the analyses. A similar data analyzing strategy is used as in our previous studies (Dezutter et al., 2013; Dezutter et al., 2014), starting with a hierarchical cluster analysis using Ward's method and squared Euclidian distances (Steinley & Brusco, 2007). In a second step, the cluster centers from this hierarchical analysis were used as nonrandom starting points in a non-interactive k-means clustering procedure (Breckenridge, 2000). This two-step procedure remedies one of the major shortcoming of the hierarchical method, namely that once a case is clustered, it cannot be reassigned to another cluster at a subsequent stage. K-means clustering, however, minimizes within-cluster variability and maximizes between-cluster variability, allowing reassignments to "better fitting" clusters and thus optimizing cluster membership (Gore, 2000). In sum, in the first step, hierarchical clustering is used in order to define the clusters, and in the second step, the *k*-means clustering assigns individuals to their "best fitting" clusters.

We considered two to six cluster solutions, first inspecting the percentage of variance in the clustering variables that is explained by the cluster solution (Milligan & Cooper, 1985). Inspection of the explained variance (adjusted *R* squared) indicated that in the 2-cluster solution the Search for Meaning dimension explained no variability (adjusted *R* squared= .006) and can therefore be considered as a not optimal fitting cluster solution. For the 3- to 6-cluster solutions, the proportions of the variance explained by each cluster solution ($ή^2$) were .63 for the 3-cluster solution, .72

for the 4-cluster solution, .77 for the 5-cluster solution, and .81 for the 6-cluster solution. The explained variance (partial $ή^2$) in both the Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning increased by 20% when moving from 3 to 4 clusters, by 9% when moving from 4 to 5 clusters, and by 9% when moving from 5 to 6 clusters, pointing to a 4-cluster solution as most optimal.

Figure 1 presents the final cluster solution, with z-scores plotted on the Y-axis. Because the clusters were defined using z-scores for the total sample, each cluster's mean z-scores indicate how far that cluster deviates from the total sample mean score and from the means of the other three clusters (Scholte et al., 2005). The distances, in standard-deviation units, among the clusters' means (and between each cluster mean and the total sample mean, which is standardized to zero) may be interpreted as an index of effect size. Analogous to Cohen's *d*, 0.2 *SD* represents a small effect, 0.5 *SD* represents a moderate effect, and 0.8 *SD* represents a large effect. The clusters that we found were characterized by *z*-scores reflecting moderate to strong deviations from the overall sample mean, suggesting that the four clusters differed considerably in terms of their scores on Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning. The four clusters found were similar to previous studies on emerging adults (Dezutter et al., 2014), chronically ill patients (Dezutter et al., 2013), and chronic pain patients (Dezutter et al., 2015) and were accordingly labeled: High Presence High Search (*n* = 144), High Presence Low Search (*n* = 82), Low Presence High Search (*n* = 110), and Low Presence Low Search (*n* = 26). The Undifferentiated cluster (Dezutter et al., 2014 – emerging adults) or the Moderate cluster (Dezutter et al., 2015 – chronic pain patients) was not found in our sample of prisoners. The effect sizes of the clusters found in our prison sample were very similar to the effect sizes

found in the other samples, except for the Low Presence Low Search cluster. The effect size for Presence of Meaning in the Low Presence Low Search cluster ranged from .05*SD* to 1*SD* in the previous samples, but was 1.8*SD* in our prison sample indicating that for prisoners with a Low Presence Low Search meaning profile, the lack of meaning was more severe than in other populations.

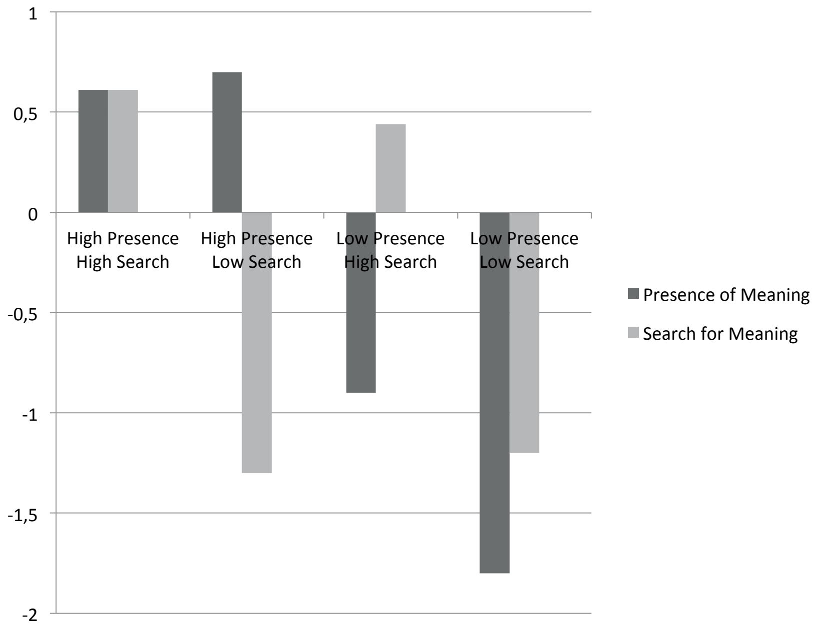

Figure 1. *Z*-scores of Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning for the Four Clusters

Cluster Differences

To test the relationship between the meaning profiles and the socio-demographic profiles of the prisoners, both ANOVA and cross-tabulation is used. Results indicated that a significant age difference was present among the meaning profiles, $F(3,359) = 3.46$, $p < .05$, $ή^2 = .03$, revealing that prisoners in the Low Presence Low Search profile were significantly older ($M = 47.46$, $SD = 12.97$) than their fellow inmates in the High Presence High Search profile ($M = 39.78$, $SD = 11.88$), High Presence Low Search profile ($M = 39.38$, $SD = 13.21$), and Low Presence High Search profile ($M = 39.08$, $SD = 12.06$). No significant differences were found for gender ($χ^2(3) = 4.04$, $p = .26$, Cramer's $v = .11$), or for educational level ($χ^2(9) = 3.70$, $p = .93$, Cramer's $v = .06$). With regard to traumatic experiences during childhood, significant differences were found ($χ^2(12) = 33.12$, $p < .01$, Cramer's $v = .18$) indicating that prisoners who experienced sexual violence during childhood were overrepresented in the Low Presence Low Search profile (Std. residual = 3.5) and prisoners who experienced physical violence during childhood were overrepresented in the Low Presence High Search profile (Std. residual = 2.2).

Furthermore, a MANOVA was conducted to investigate whether the different meaning profiles were related to differences in experienced distress and different assumptions about the world, the self and others as well as care for others. Based upon Wilks' lambda, statistically significant multivariate cluster differences were found, $F(15, 342) = 8.73$, $p < .001$, $ή^2 = .12$. The univariate F-values, $ή^2$, and multiple pairwise combinations conducted using the Tukey's Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) test, are displayed in Table 2. Effect sizes ranged from moderate (6% of the variance explained) to large (19% of the

variance explained) (Cohen, 1988). Inmates with a High Presence High Search profile were very similar to inmates with a High Presence Low Search profile. Both groups showed lower levels of distress, and more positive assumptions of the Benevolence of the World as well as the Worthiness of the Self and higher levels of Care for Others compared to their fellow inmates with a Low Presence High Search profile or a Low Presence Low Search profile. Inmates with a High Presence High Search profile differed only on Meaningfulness of the World from their fellow inmates with a High Presence Low Search profile, the latter exhibiting significantly more negative assumptions of Meaningfulness of the World. Also both profiles characterized by Low Presence (i.c., Low Presence High Search and Low Presence Low Search) were similar in their relation to the study variables. This seems to indicate that with regard to distress, World Assumptions and Care for Others, the dimension of experience of meaning (High versus Low Presence) is more important than the dimension of search for meaning (High versus Low Search).

Tabel 2

Univariate ANOVAS and Post-hoc Cluster Comparisons Based Upon Tukey HSD Tests for Prison Distress, World Assumptions and Care for Others

	High Presence High Search	High Presence Low Search	Low Presence High Search	Low Presence Low Search	*F*(3,342)	ή²
Distress	2.62[a] (.60)	2.63[a] (.65)	3.06[b] (.56)	3.05[b] (.47)	14.42 **	.11
Benevolence of the World	3.65[a] (.96)	3.87[a] (.84)	3.28[b] (.84)	3.52[ab] (.84)	6.87 **	.06
Meaningfulness of the World	3.78[a] (.78)	3.38[b] (.78)	3.45[b] (.68)	3.16[b] (.68)	8.79 **	.07
Worthiness of Self	3.98[a] (.75)	3.99[a] (.68)	3.30[b] (.61)	3.25[b] (.76)	27.22 **	.19
Care for Others	4.72[a] (.95)	4.50[a] (.97)	4.16[b] (.91)	3.95[b] (1.26)	8.91 **	.07

Note. A cluster mean is significantly different from another mean if they have different superscript Standard deviations are noted between brackets.

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$.

Discussion

We conducted a cross-sectional study of 365 prisoners focusing on identifying meaning profiles. Based on earlier studies in other populations (Dezutter et al., 2013; Dezutter et al., 2014), we expected at least four meaning profiles among prisoners. Furthermore, we wanted to explore whether these profiles would differ from each other with respect to distress, care for others, world assumptions, and traumatic experiences during childhood.

Our study revealed four different profiles, similar to meaning-profiles in non-offender populations (Dezutter et al., 2013, 2014, 2015). A first profile was characterized by high levels of presence of meaning, and high levels of search for meaning. A second profile was also marked by high levels of meaning, but showed at the same time lower levels of search for meaning. Both profiles were characterized by lower levels of distress, more care for others, more positive world assumptions including higher levels of self-worth compared to the other two profiles, which were marked by lower levels of meaning. Although the factor search for meaning was essential to distinguish these four profiles, this suggests that it was primarily the presence of meaning variable that made a qualitative distinction between two main categories of prisoners. These main categories (with higher versus lower levels of meaning) resemble Maruna's (2001) binary distinction between offenders with self-transcendent values and more self-worth and offenders with what he called "empty" meaning and a more self-centered attitude. In general, the fact that higher levels of meaning in prisoners were associated with lower levels of distress, higher levels of self-worth and more self-transcendent values confirm earlier findings in non-offender populations (Baumeister, 1991; Delle Fave et al., 2013; Steger, 2012).

However, the first two profiles related differently to Meaningfulness of the World. Apparently, prisoners with the first profile (High Presence High Search) seemed to experience the world as a more meaningful place than prisoners who experienced meaning but who did not search for meaning. We speculate as to whether this has something to do with the fact that prisoners, those who search for meaning and also experience meaning during incarceration, display a more open attitude towards the world than prisoners who do not search. Openness to experience, being relationally-oriented and having curiosity towards the outside world have been found to be more associated with searchers than with individuals who experience meaning but who are less likely to search (Steger et al., 2008). This could explain why searching prisoners with the first profile experience the world as more meaningful, because they are more world-oriented and might have found meaning in relation to the world during their search.

The last two profiles (Low Presence High Search, and Low Presence Low Search) were virtually identical in how they related to distress, care for others and world assumptions. Older prisoners were overrepresented in the last profile (Low Presence Low Search). Crawley and Sparks (2011) argue that older prisoners have a harder time dealing with the existential consequences of being incarcerated. Because of their age, they might have lost more sources of meaning by being incarcerated in terms of career, relationships, contact with children, and a more defined purpose in life. This might explain why these prisoners experience more meaninglessness. However, this does not explain why these prisoners do not search for new purposes in life. Although this is only based on our clinical experience, older prisoners seem to be more pessimistic about their future outside

prison. The prospect of having to start afresh once released might be discouraging once one has passed a certain age.

The same profile (Low Presence Low Search) was also overrepresented by prisoners with a history of sexual abuse during childhood. Prisoners who experienced physical violence were overrepresented in the third profile (Low Presence, High Search). Our findings confirm previous studies that prisoners with a history of traumatic experiences in childhood have less positive world assumptions (Mashi et al., 2010; Mashi & Gibson, 2012), and experience lower levels of meaning in life. Interestingly, prisoners in these profiles also showed higher levels of distress. In a study with 4,204 prisoners, Wolff et al. (2013) discovered that distress was associated with hopelessness. Wolff et al. (2013) were concerned about the future of prisoners who showed these levels of hopelessness. They questioned whether these prisoners would have the courage to search for new meaning and goals once they were released. In their opinion, the absence of new goals and a sense of hopelessness were serious risk factors for recidivism in the future. We share this concern for the prisoners in our study who showed low levels of meaning in their lives, especially those prisoners with the fourth profile (Low Meaning Low Search). Prisoners with this profile showed a more severe lack of meaning compared to people with the same profile in non-offender populations (Dezutter et al., 2013, 2014, 2015). They seem to reflect the experience of meaninglessness and the absence of search of meaning of the persisting offenders in Lieblings' study (2001), and confirm the lower meaning among prisoners in the study conducted by Mandhouj et al. (2014). Prisoners with this profile also seem to reflect what Frankl (1959/2006) called an *existential vacuum*. This existential vacuum is a state of being marked by meaninglessness, emptiness and

apathy. People who reside in this vacuum are in extreme need of support (Frankl, 1959/2006).

Limitations

This study has some limitations that need to be taken into account when interpreting the results. First, because cluster analysis is a data-driven procedure, the nature of the sample is of paramount importance and limits the generalizations that can be drawn from this study. We restricted our sample to prisoners who speak Dutch, the official language in the Northern part of Belgium, but a certain minority in Belgian prisons are foreign nationals who only speak their native language, such as Arabic, Russian, etcetera. The downside of this restriction is that we did not include this faction of the prison population. Replication of the current findings in other samples of prisoners – which would also include cultural minorities - would be important in order to determine whether the same profiles would emerge. Being a cross-sectional study, we were not able to search for causal relationships, or to explore the long-term implications of meaning-profiles on societal re-entry and desistance from crime.

Conclusions

The present study is the first study that has examined meaning-profiles among prisoners. Four different profiles based on prisoners' experience of meaning and search for meaning were discovered. Prisoners with profiles that were marked by higher levels of meaning experienced less distress, more positive world assumptions, higher levels of self-worth, and more care for others compared to prisoners with low meaning-profiles.

In a way, the experience of meaning seems to buffer the daily experience of distress, as we described in the case of Martha. Because positive world assumptions - including higher levels of self-worth - and self-transcendent values have been associated with desistance from crime (Maruna et al, 2001; Mashi & Gibson, 2012), we might assume that prisoners with these profiles might have better chances to re-integrate and to lead pro-social and fulfilling lives in the future.

Our study also discovered that some groups within the prison population might deserve special attention. Older prisoners and prisoners who experienced sexual abuse during childhood were more present in the profile that was marked by lower levels of meaning and lower levels of search for meaning. Their meaning-profile seems to reflect an existential vacuum, which Frankl (1959/2006) described as a state of being marked by meaninglessness, emptiness and apathy. People who reside in this vacuum are in extreme need of support (Frankl, 1959/2006). But prisoners who search for meaning but do not experience meaning would also benefit from psychological assistance. More research is needed to identify personal characteristics of prisoners with low meaning profiles. At the same time, psychological support with an eye for existential issues is requisite for older prisoners and prisoners with a background of traumatic experiences during childhood.

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Chapter 6

Ten prisoners on a search for meaning: A qualitative study of loss and growth during incarceration.

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Abstract

Ten prisoners describe how their crime and incarceration challenged them to change in profound ways. Feelings of loss, guilt, shame and despair accompanied their experience of being dehumanized by guards and rejected by former friends. The participants of this qualitative study coped with their despair primarily with social and emotional support, and a search for new meaning in life. They realized that coping with prison life was a matter of choice and involved taking responsibility for their own future. Reported areas of growth include more insight into their own personal story, higher levels of self-worth, newfound strengths, a more nuanced way of thinking, new relational skills and a changed meaning in life.

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Introduction

Since the origins of humankind, people have tried to make sense of the world around them and of their inner lives (Schneider, 2013). Myths and stories have served as answers to existential questions about the origin and the meaning of life, but also about more specific issues such as where evil comes from, why misfortune hits us, and how we can cope with pain and suffering in our lives (Bohart et al., 2013). One of the oldest stories about evil and crime is to be found in the Jewish Torah. In this story recounting the first of humankind's murders, Cain kills his brother Abel. God punishes Cain by banishing him from his land and by sending him into the unknown wilderness. Cain becomes a "ceaseless wanderer on earth" (Lieber, 2001, p.27). God promises Cain that nobody will kill him while he is wandering in God's absence. Eventually, Cain meets his partner, becomes a father and the founder of the city Enoch.

In a way, there are remarkable parallels between Cain's story and those of many offenders who have to leave "their lands" after committing a crime. They are being banished to a "wilderness" called prison, and they also might feel abandoned by what was once sacred to them. But also like Cain, after wandering and feeling lost for a certain time, some prisoners eventually become the founders of their own "new city". Recent qualitative studies have reported about these "new cities" among offenders (Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014, Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Maruna et al., 2006, Vanhooren et al., 2015, van Ginneken, 2014). In modern language, this positive change after a period of wandering in the dark is called *posttraumatic growth*. Posttraumatic growth has been defined as a profound change in how people experience themselves, in how they appreciate others

and in how they relate to life in general (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Posttraumatic growth and meaning-making processes have been studied extensively in a wide variety of populations and situations (e.g. Cho & Park, 2013; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), but only recently in offenders and prisoners.

A Possible Pathway to Growth and Meaning during Incarceration

The content of prisoners' meaning in life has been identified as an important sign of desistance from crime. Maruna (2001) studied differences between ex-prisoners who desisted from crime and ex-prisoners who persisted in having criminal careers. Interestingly, no differences were found in their socio-demographic background, in the kind of crimes committed, the number of committed crimes, or even in their personality structure. However, one of the main differences between desisting and persisting offenders was the fact that they showed distinct meanings in life. Persistent offenders showed what Maruna (2001) called "empty" meanings. Their life purposes reflected this emptiness in the pursuit of hedonic happiness, such as hyper-consumption and thrill-seeking. On the other hand, meaning in life of the individuals in the desisting group consisted of self-transcendent values and the desire to mean something for others.

Changes in meanings in life are a common a result of disruptive life experiences (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). As Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) argue, posttraumatic growth and new meanings only appear after an intensive period of processing a distressing life event that has disrupted one's foundations in life. Recently, qualitative studies have argued

that the act of committing a crime and spending time in prison can have a disruptive effect on how a person experiences him or herself and the world (Liebling & Maruna, 2011; Vanhooren et al., 2015). Prison studies have documented how the entry phase of incarceration is particularly distressing. It has been identified as a period of heightened vulnerability with higher rates of self-harm and suicide (Crawley & Sparks, 2011; Harvey, 2011; Liebling & Maruna, 2011). Incarceration is often experienced as disruptive on multiple levels (Haney, 2003; Harvey, 2011). Prisoners are faced with the challenge of living in an environment that is characterized by sparse physical comfort, lack of privacy, a perceived lack of physical safety, as well as by limitations on one's physical freedom and one's agency (Haney, 2003; Liebling & Maruna, 2011). Prisoners often experience distrust towards each other and towards prison guards and staff (Haney, 2003 Harner & Riley, 2013). Being incarcerated also has consequences for one's relationship with the outside world. Imprisonment often leads to relationship breakdowns (Haney, 2003). On a personal and existential level, incarceration leads to the loss of one's identity and meaning in life (Harner & Riley, 2013; Jewkes, 2011, Maruna et al., 2006).

Depending on how prisoners cope with their prison experience, they can change for the better or for the worse. Negative changes as an effect of incarceration and relapse have been significantly documented by different studies (e.g. Haney, 2003; Liebling & Maruna, 2011; Phillips & Lindsay, 2011). Recently, qualitative studies have reported on the positive changes, including possible pathways that can lead to posttraumatic growth and new meanings in life (Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014, Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Maruna et al., 2006, Vanhooren et al., 2015, van Ginneken, 2014).

Typically, the process that leads to posttraumatic growth is evoked by the loss of meaning itself. Initially, prisoners who reported growth in a later stage felt distress as a result from this loss. Maruna et al. (2006) describe in their qualitative study how their participants (*n* = 75) felt confused in this initial stage and how they felt challenged by existential questions that appeared together with the experience of imprisonment such as "Why did I do this?" and "Who am I?" A recurrent feeling the prisoners experienced was that the crime and imprisonment didn't make sense to them. Braswell and Wells (2014) describe the emptiness that goes along with these questions.

When prisoners experience the loss of meaning and the distress that comes along with this loss and the challenging questions, the next step on the pathway to posttraumatic growth is to search for new meanings. Ferrito et al. (2012) discovered how the search for meaning after committing a crime took a central role in the prisoners' change. The participants in the study of Maruna et al. (2006) also became active searchers for meaning. This search for meaning does not only cover the search for new purposes in life, but also the search for a deeper comprehension of the offenders' crime and their life story. Mapham and Hefferon (2012) describe how the participants of their study (*n* = 14) found it crucial to process and acquire a deeper understanding of earlier childhood experiences. Ferrito et al. (2012) also found that prisoners reconstructed their life story by searching for answers about the crime, trying to understand earlier life experiences and by engaging in a quest to understand the meaning of life. In this way, a deep recalibration of one's basic understanding of who one is and what or who to live for translated into posttraumatic growth. This whole process was experienced by prisoners in different studies as a turning point in life, evoked by committing

a crime and subsequent incarceration (Elisha et al., 2013; Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014, Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Maruna et al., 2006, Vanhooren et al., 2015, van Ginneken, 2014).

The reported posttraumatic growth in these studies, or the result of losing and searching for meaning, matches the areas of growth in the general population: a changed perception of self, a deeper appreciation of relationships and a changed philosophy of life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In the case of offenders, posttraumatic growth was also accompanied by a paradigm shift in taking responsibility towards their victims and the consequences of their crime (Elisha et al., 2013; Ferrito et al., 2012; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012).

Both the qualitative studies on posttraumatic growth and Maruna's study (2001) report a content shift in the general sense of meaning in life. In order to acquire a deeper understanding of the process that leads to this shift, it would be interesting to know how this change is connected to the former experienced loss of meaning and to the coping styles offenders used to overcome the initial loss of meaning. Because the content of the new meaning of life seems to be important in how one relates to crime in the future (Maruna, 2001; Ward et al., 2007), it would be worth exploring the process of finding new meaning on a content level.

Aim of This Study

Recently, qualitative studies have described the occurrence of meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth among offenders and prisoners (cf. supra). Maruna (2001) argued that the changed content of offenders' meaning in life is an important sign of desistance from crime. In this study, we want to explore if

the new content of meaning is linked to the loss of former meaning and to the way prisoners try to cope with this loss. If there is a connection, we want to explore how the new content is linked to the loss of meaning and coping strategies. We are also interested in identifying how the possible pathway to posttraumatic growth (which runs through a loss of meaning, a search for meaning and finding new meaning) is connected with existential themes such as guilt, despair, choice and responsibility. In order to explore these nuanced lived experiences, as well as the connections between these phenomena, we opted for a qualitative over a quantitative design. Qualitative methods are sensitive to the nuances of multi-layered and interconnected complex phenomena (McLeod, 2011). Qualitative studies can explore in detail how people try to make sense of their own experience and can also illuminate abstract existential themes.

Method

Procedure

This qualitative study was embedded in a broader study on meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth during incarceration. Participants of this larger quantitative study in the Belgian prison of Brugge were invited to participate in a study about their prison experiences and how this affected their meaning in life. The invitation letter contained information about the purpose of the study and the fact that participants would be interviewed, audio-taped, and that the findings would be published. The letter also contained an informed consent document. In order

to assure maximum privacy, the potential participants dropped their signed informed consent letter in a private mailbox in prison. Because the time frame to perform the research in prison was limited, only the first ten responders out of 30 were invited for the interview. No incentives were given. The informed consent document and the study itself were approved by the ethical commission of the University of Leuven (Belgium) and by the Belgian General Directory of prison institutions. The interviews were performed in March and April 2014. Each interview was conducted in a separate office room and took 60 to 80 minutes.

The participants were interviewed by the first author (an experienced psychotherapist). In this semi-structured biographical interview, the participants were invited to reflect on their earliest prison experiences, how they coped with incarceration and how their life evolved during their incarceration until the moment of the interview. The participants were also invited to reflect on their experience of meaning in life and their future.

Participants

The participants were prisoners of the prison of Brugge, a mid to high security prison with a closed regime in Belgium. Four of the participants were female and six were male. The age of the participants ranged from 28 to 57 years (M = 39.7), and their time spent in prison during this incarceration ranged from one to ten years (M = 4.2). Five of them were first-time prisoners, two were in prison for the second time and three were in prison for the fourth time. The participants were incarcerated for different

reasons: Cecilia, Aisha and Nancy were imprisoned for murder; Roger for attempted murder and domestic violence; Tom for physical violence; Chris, Jonas and Adam for sexual delinquency; and Jeff and Jill for arson.[14] In order to protect the privacy of the participants, we used pseudonym first names. What these ten prisoners had in common was that they were highly motivated to change for the better during their prison time.

Analysis

A phenomenological analysis was performed on the transcripts of the audio-taped interviews. We used the 'Duquesne method' (McLeod, 2011) which consists of a step by step phenomenological analysis: extraction of significant statements of the participants, elimination of irrelevant information, identification of central meanings or themes implicit in the statements, and integration of the meanings into a single description of the phenomenon. The following central themes were identified: (1) initial experiences of incarceration, (2) guilt, despair and loss of meaning, (3) ways of coping, (4) posttraumatic growth and meaning in life, and (5) remaining pains and anxiety for the future.

Results

Initial Experiences of Incarceration

The participants of our study described in various ways how incarceration impacted their lives. The lack of physical comfort, privacy and safety and also the harsh conduct of prison guards

14 In order to protect the privacy of the participants, we used pseudonyms.

left a deep impression. Cecilia described the impact the first days of her incarceration had on her: "You arrive here, you have to undress yourself and you have to shower. Three people were watching me while I was showering. I felt those eyes on my body. I felt naked, vulnerable. I immediately got a sense that I was not a person anymore but merely an object. I felt humiliated as a woman. Then they give you a uniform and they put you into a cell. The door closes and there you are, with thousand of questions and your tears. It felt like those walls would crush me. I felt anxious and I couldn't breathe anymore. I was shouting for help, but nobody came." This type of initial incarceration experience was shared by all participants.

Participants also described how distrustful they were of other prisoners right from the start. Adam explained how he feared for his life: "I was locked up with different people. They had been together in that cell for a longer period. I was the only new one. I was scared to death. I had the sense that something terrible would happen to me during the night." Tom explained how he never felt so lonely before: "Everybody here distrusts one another. Everybody is so self-protective. There is no-one to talk to, you have no friends here. The contact with other prisoners is very instrumental: you do something for me, I will do something for you."

Overall, there was a general experience of a lack of medical and psychological care. Seven participants complained that they had numerous personal questions during the first weeks but nobody seemed to be available. Aisha explains it this way: "I just committed a murder. I didn't know why I did it, or what was happening to me. There was no one to talk to. It drove me crazy. I became aggressive and as a consequence I was sanctioned all the time."

The participants also confirmed how confinement had an impact on their contact with the outside world. Although most of the participants had remaining contacts with the outside world, all of them lost important relationships. The partner of Chris cheated on him during the first months of his incarceration, which led to a relationship breakdown. Cecilia describes how people who promised to visit her simply didn't show up: "My best friend never came to visit me because she had a new partner. She said that visiting me in prison would probably harm her new relationship."

Being incarcerated also took a toll on one's role as a parent. Nancy, who had been in prison for ten years by this point, described how her relationship with her children faded away: "I lost contact with my oldest daughter, with my son... I even never met his children, my grandchildren." Jonas wasn't allowed to visit his wife while she was giving birth to their first child. Jeff felt like he let his son down, because he was imprisoned. Cecilia couldn't see her children anymore because of the decision of the judge: "He simply thought that it would be a good idea that my children wouldn't see me anymore. I lost my children... That was awful."

Another element that made them feel disconnected from the outside world were the oversimplified comments on their cases in newspapers, and the hostile reactions on social media such as Facebook.

For some, incarceration meant a financial drain: three of them lost their own business. All of them lost a certain level of material comfort and their physical liberty. They emphasized that the dehumanizing conduct of some guards, the social anxiety of inmates, the absence of authentic human care and the subsequent loneliness were the hardest conditions of their prison experience.

Beyond these concrete conditions that are inherent in life in prison - the absence of authentic human contact and the loss of relationships - the participants had to cope with feelings of confusion, guilt, and despair.

Guilt, Despair, and Loss of Meaning

Both the awareness of having committed a crime and of being imprisoned filled the participants with feelings of shame and guilt. Aisha tried to describe these feelings: "Shocking. Inconceivable. There are no words for what I have done. I really feel confused. I feel deeply ashamed now. I failed towards my family and towards myself." Jill uttered: "I will never be able to forgive myself. I simply didn't know what I was doing. Do I still have the right to live together with a partner?" As Jamieson and Grounds (2011) argue, prison and crime also can lead to a loss of identity and self-worth. Aisha describes it this way: "It is like being in hell. Suddenly, you lose everything. Nothing remains. You don't recognize yourself anymore. So strange. Do you understand? It feels like you are totally a different person."

The awareness of guilt and the reality of being imprisoned led to moments of despair and a general loss of meaning in life. Tom says: "You enter prison and your whole life is destroyed. Everything that once was certain becomes uncertain. I'm not sure if I still have the right to live." And he goes on: "Everybody wants to mean something in life. If I would die right now my life wouldn't have had any meaning at all." Nancy had a similar experience: "Three times I tried to commit suicide here. I did it out of despair and having the feeling that I was not worthy of being alive."

These deep feelings of despair that accompany guilt and the

loss of meaning appear to be quite common among prisoners (Gee et al., 2011). Braswell and Wells (2014) explain how despair and the loss of meaning can lead to profound experiences of emptiness during incarceration. Jeff describes it this way: "I felt powerless, empty, and groundless."

Coping with Despair and Loss of Meaning

The participants described three main categories of coping with their loss of meaning and despair. First, there was seeking social and emotional support. Second, there was searching for new meaning. Finally, there were avoidant strategies such as avoiding unsafe contacts, sleeping as much as possible, and the use of drugs and medication. Interestingly, the participants described that they consciously made the choice regarding which strategy to use.

Social and emotional support. Janoff-Bulman (1992) underlined the importance of social support during periods of disruptive life events. On one hand, people who had been close to the person in distress can exacerbate the situation by taking distance from the person who suffers. On the other hand, the presence of authentic relationships can help the distressed person to make sense of what happened, and eventually to find new meaning in life (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

In our sample, the most common way prisoners coped was by seeking and accepting emotional support from others. The participants described how finding support from others was extremely important for them in order to crawl out of their deepest despair. Jeff describes it this way: "My son and the people around me here, psychologists and social workers, gave me the power to survive and to change." Roger had a similar

experience: "Suddenly, for the first time in my life, there were people standing up for me, and they didn't judge me. That made a huge difference." Chris got this message from a friend: "We will always be there for you." It is a sentence that keeps him going when he has tough times. Even from a distance, the awareness that there somebody who cares about you is out there can make a difference. Nancy, in a moment of feeling particularly desperate, said: "My daughter knows I am still here, and that's enough to go on". Jonas put it this way: "My mother told me that she saw that I was changing, and that gave me the courage to go on."

Not only friends and family fulfilled this role. Over time, other prisoners, guards and staff helped make this difference. Chris: "I felt a lot of support from my cellmate. We were going through the same problems so it was easy in a way to vent my emotions with him." Cecilia felt a lot of support from guards: "They pulled me through my most difficult period, they constantly tried to persuade me that I still had a future ahead. Step by step, they also gave me more responsibility and I had the feeling that they really trusted me. That gave me a boost."

Searching for meaning. Another way of coping was searching for new meaning. Jeff mentioned that he spent hours thinking in his prison cell: "You start to reflect on the meaning of your life. Shouldn't I have done things differently? And without people who were making decisions in my place, for the first time in my life, I started to make my own decisions." Tom: "You start to wonder about the essential questions in life, things I never thought about before." Some participants used religious resources as a way to make sense of what was happening. Nancy explained how religion helped her to give meaning to her situation and helped her to stay alive: "Religion is now keeping me from committing suicide. I pray a lot, and I read the Bible. The stories in the Bible help me

to understand what is happening here and tell me that life isn't easy. That comforts me." Aisha confirms this: "I am religious. My faith in Allah will help me through this experience." Tom says: "Faith is something to cling to in prison, in fact it is an anchor during life… I try to practice yoga everyday". Roger explains how religion helped him: "Religion contains important values that guide me through this experience. If something happens here, I start to think: What would Jesus have done in this situation?" Trying to fulfill new purposes in life is also a means of coping with despair. Nancy set up a knitting project to support orphans in Eastern-Europe: a chaplain sold the knitted bunnies outside prison and the profit went entirely to that orphanage. The idea that she was helping people kept her going.

Therapy was also described as a way of coping with their situations, to find emotional support and as a way to find answers to existential questions. All participants went into therapy at some point during their incarceration. Therapy was experienced as a safe place where they felt really met and seen by the therapist. Participants reported that therapy helped them to make sense of what had happened, to process the crime and its consequences, and to process earlier traumatic experiences in life. Cecilia gave words to her experience: "When I entered prison, I couldn't talk about what had happened in my life, about my thoughts of what was buried in my heart. The crime and prison destroyed the wall that I had built around my childhood experiences, and I felt overwhelmed by all those traumatic memories. I didn't have the energy to build a new wall. First I tried to open up towards other prisoners but they made fun of me. Instead of harming myself or using drugs, I decided to go into therapy. It was very hard in the beginning. In the beginning I talked very fast, because I wanted to get everything out of me. Step by step I learned to give my

memories a place, and I became more aware how things were connected in my life. It all started to make sense. I am stronger now."

Avoidant strategies. Interestingly, the participants didn't open up for everybody. They made clear distinctions between safe and unsafe relationships. Six participants mentioned that they avoided contact with other prisoners. Avoidance from others could take various forms. It ranged from staying in their cell, like Nancy, but also by being 'polite' while having feelings of disgust towards others, which was Aisha's approach. Another way to avoid contact with other prisoners was to sleep during daytime. Three participants reported that they tried to sleep as much as possible during the first weeks of their incarceration. One participant, Roger, kept on sleeping during the day as much as possible throughout seven years, because he preferred the quiet of the night over the noise of other the prisoners during daytime.

A common way to cope with despair in prison is to use drugs and medication (Rokach, 1997). In our sample, the prisoners tried to avoid medication and drugs but weren't always successful. Some participants used them during certain time periods, such as before their trial, to deaden their emotions and thoughts. Cecilia: "I never took real medication in my life before. But I was so at the end of my rope that I went to the doctor. From then on, I took all kinds of medication. I felt locked up in my body, but it gave me some peace of mind. It pulled me through that period, and it helped me to survive, but then it was time to get rid of it. I just got stuck in my situation and it didn't help me to move forward with my life."

Remarkably, half of the participants explained that how one copes with prison is primarily a matter of choice. This reminds us of Maruna's study (2001) where he found that actively making

choices is usually avoided by persistent offenders. In this way, persistent offenders attempt to limit their responsibility for their failures: it is easier to blame society for failure when one doesn't take responsibility for the choices made in life.

On the other hand, offenders who desist from crime seem to take more personal responsibility and make clear choices in their lives. Jeff explained: "You can easily flee into drugs, you let yourself go, you eat a lot and your prison time will soon be over. They will release you, but you will be back soon. I didn't want to take that trail. I choose a different direction." Tom put it this way: "I believe that people can change. Sometimes people need a second chance... or a sixth or seventh chance, but it is possible. But what's crucial is that the change has to come from within the person. For myself, when I came in here, it was a matter of choice: either I had to commit suicide or I have to change my life completely. I choose the latter." Adam explained his opinion: "You can learn something from your situation or you can go along with drugs and other stuff, and you will end up worse than before." At this stage in their incarceration, we see indications that are evocative of Maruna's study (2001) in which he identified one element of desistance from future crime: prisoners who take responsibility for their lives and their choices.

Posttraumatic Growth and Meaning in Life

The participants reported different kinds of growth, which they described as being a direct result of incarceration. Roger explained: "Incarceration was like walking with my face against the wall, which apparently I needed in order to finally wake up and change." The reported kinds of growth contained new insights in their personal stories, higher levels of self-worth, newfound

strengths, a more nuanced way of thinking and processing information, new relational skills, and a changed meaning in life.

Insight in personal story and dynamics. All participants experienced new insights as a result of processing the consequences of the crime and incarceration. Jeff explains: "Thanks to incarceration I have the feeling that I know better who I am and what I want in life. I had time here to search for who I was. Without this period, I would never have had such a clear vision of who I am." Jeff also acquired insight about the underlying dynamics of the crime: "I always had to prove myself, I always had to go beyond my own boundaries in order to please others, but people didn't appreciate it. Being disappointed I started drinking every time. I didn't really deal with my problems. Now I know that I'm ok and that there is somebody – my son – who loves me, no matter what. I don't have to prove myself anymore." Roger discovered that he sabotaged himself during his life: "I discovered that I experienced myself as a loser in the past, and that defining myself that way was in fact very comfortable. Being a loser, I didn't have to take responsibility for my life."

Higher levels of self-worth. Participants also reported higher levels of self-respect and more autonomy. Higher levels of self-worth were expressed by being more respectful towards one's self. On a basic physical level, Jeff and Tom both expressed that they learned to respect and to take better care of their bodies. Cecilia said that she used to obey people automatically. She described how she learned to be more assertive and to ask for respect for her boundaries. In the past, she used to obey anyone who told her what to do. Now, she is taking her first steps in paving her own way. Some participants experienced that they were stronger than they thought they were. Nancy discovered: "I never thought that I would survive prison and yet I do. I don't

know how this is possible." Tom concluded: "For the first time in my life, I feel proud of myself, because I really have the feeling that I'm changing."

New strengths. The participants also described new strengths they discovered or developed during their prison time. They were convinced that these new strengths would help them in the future. Cecilia learned to ask for and to receive help from others. Jeff said that he learned to persevere, also during hard times, and not to run away from his problems. Instead of having a short-term perspective, Jonas reported that he acquired the ability to think about the consequences of his actions in the long run. Tom discovered his faith in the fact that he could change, and that change is possible.

Interestingly, strengths like perseverance, asking for help, receiving help, long-term planning and self-care have been described as *hardiness* skills (Maddi, 2014). Hardiness has been defined as an attitude that enables people to turn stress into growth opportunities (Maddi, 2014), and is a typical outcome of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2012).

A more nuanced way of thinking. Different participants also displayed a more nuanced way of thinking and experiencing. They gave examples of how they experienced themselves and others in a more nuanced way. Roger is talking about his mother. She visited him last week, and in the midst of their conversation, there was a conflict. Roger tells us what happened at that very moment: "...And I asked her: 'Do you really think I would do that?' In the past, I would have left the room immediately. But now, I found myself thinking: Wait a minute, why is she saying this? Then I could see that she was in fact concerned about me." Tom gave a similar example: "I really felt agitated with him. Then I started to ask myself the question: "Why does he agitate me?" I

could see that he reminded me of myself and my junky behavior in the past. Okay, that's not his fault." Tom also showed a more nuanced worldview: "It is a hard world, not only within the prison but also outside. We don't live in Utopia. I think it is a part of life, to accept that there is injustice and that we have to find a way how to cope with it."

Relational skills. Participants also experienced changes in their contact with others. They gave examples of how they perceived others in a different way and how their empathy has grown. Tom explains: 'For the first time in my life, I started to see people as real individuals with their own needs and stories. A guard told me that one of his children died a number of years ago. I felt myself leaving my role as a prisoner towards a guard. I told him that this must have been terrible and that I couldn't imagine how much pain he must have felt…." He adds: "A hard thing to learn for me was to be open towards the positive in life. It still makes me sometimes anxious. I started to learn that there really is some positive in people. In the past, I only experienced distrust towards others." Adam told us how he gradually learned to listen and to talk to others: "I learned to step down from my first impression that I had of people. I learned to see the positive in others and how to communicate, to be more tolerant towards individuals and groups of people." Jill explained how she learned to be more authentic in her relationships with others: "I learned to talk about my personal problems with friends, which I avoided in the past."

A changed meaning in life. Overall, the participants experienced shifts in their appreciation for life and in their meaning of life. Maruna (2001) argues that desisting offenders shift from an empty, self-centered and materialistic way of life to self-transcendent values and purposes in life. Adam illustrates

this shift: “I used to live only for luxury and money. I always wanted to have more and more. I sold drugs to buy fancy stuff, but I also started to cheat and to lie to get more. In fact, it was not worth it. I lost everything in the end, also my friends and family. Now I can tell that luxury is not worth living for. I still want to earn money in the future, but not anymore for the sake of being rich, it is so destructive.” Other participants confirm this shift in values and meaning in life. Tom: “I don’t want to be rich anymore or make a career. If I could make a difference in a persons’ life, my life would have been successful.” This shift in meaning also led to different purposes in life. Jill gives a good example: “My life would mean something if I would mean something for another person, that’s why I want to study again to become a nurse.”

In a concrete way, most participants referred to their children and family members as their source of meaning in life. Seven of the ten participants also became more religious or spiritual during their prison time. Jonas converted to Evangelical Christianity. He developed a strong faith in Jesus. He explained how faith filled his emptiness and that he experienced love from God. Tom became a yogi. By practicing yoga every day in his prison cell, and by reading about yoga, he took eventually a spiritual leap: “I now think that there is a God, but I don’t think I have the capacity to fully understand what ‘God’ is. I think it’s something universal, God is in each of us and it doesn’t matter if you’re a Muslim or a Catholic. I think that God transcends religions. In the past, I thought religion was for sissies, for pedophile priests and for terrorists.”

The descriptions of posttraumatic growth among these participants seem to suggest that there might be an underlying process that connects all these elements of growth. Rogers (1961) argues that personal growth – which encompasses more self-

worth, autonomy, connectedness, responsibility and acceptance – is characterized by a growing openness to experience. In our sample, the participants seemed to have developed this quality. A larger openness to their personal experience helped them to acknowledge the consequences of their crime, which led to shifts in their life stories and new personal skills (such as respecting their boundaries). Openness to experience also made it possible to connect with people in a different way (e.g. to see the positive in others), and to think in a more nuanced way (e.g. being able to leave first impressions behind). A growing openness to experience can also accumulate to a shift in one's meaning in life (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2001). In this way, it is not surprising that the participants also experienced permanent losses as a consequence of their crime, although there were clear signs of posttraumatic growth.

Remaining Pains and Anxiety About the Future

Although many signs of posttraumatic growth were obvious among the participants, they also all showed signs of remaining pain on an emotional and relational level and anxiety about the future. These pains and fears were different from what the participants experienced as the pains of their entry period. They experienced this as more of a long-lasting pain, something they would carry along with them for the rest of their lives.

The participants described feelings of guilt and shame about the crime but also about the fact that they had been imprisoned. Jill talked about the burden of being a prisoner: "I feel deeply ashamed that I have been imprisoned. In a way, I will probably feel isolated for the rest of my life. How do you tell a potential partner that you have been imprisoned?" Tom expressed it this

way: "Being a prisoner became a part of my identity, more than I ever wanted." Jeff talked about the irreversible guilt towards his son, and Chris said how he felt he failed others.

There was also a feeling that they were disconnected from the lives of important people outside prison, especially their children, and that by being imprisoned, they were missing the opportunity to be part of their children's lives. Aisha, who had at least 7 years of incarceration still ahead, had to leave her son behind when he was not even one year old. In an act of self-defense, she killed her husband who was beating her. As the killer of the father of her son, she was not allowed to take her son – who was still a baby at that time – with her into prison. Aisha suffered over the fact that somebody else was raising her son now and that she had to miss to see him growing up day by day.

Jill worried over her future: "I wonder how to find work with a criminal record." Nancy was afraid to think about the future outside prison. She often felt discouraged when the idea crossed her mind that she would have to rebuild a whole new life once she was released. Chris was afraid that he would give up along the way.

In the case of Cecilia, her losses and pains were in fact deeply connected to her growth: "I lost my religion but I became more spiritual. I also lost most of my friends, but my relationship with others grew deeper."

Discussion and Conclusions

In a sample of ten prisoners, we explored different elements that have been documented as important steps towards posttraumatic growth. Different qualitative studies on posttraumatic growth among this population described a loss of meaning as a consequence of incarceration and having committed a crime, a period of searching for meaning, and eventually the emergence of growth as distinct phases in this process (Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014, Mapham & Hefferon, 2012; Maruna et al., 2006, Vanhooren et al., 2015, van Ginneken, 2014). Overall, our study confirmed this possible pathway to growth, but also revealed some possible connections between the areas of loss, the way of coping and the new meanings. Furthermore, the participants of our study also highlighted choice as an important element in the process that leads to growth and meaning.

First, it is remarkable that the participants emphasized the relational context of incarceration to be the hardest prison condition. The way participants described the dehumanizing behavior of some guards, the absence of authentic human care, and the social anxiety towards other prisoners sounds like they predominantly experienced *I-it relationships* in the beginning of their prison time. Martin Buber (1923/2003) describes I-it relationships as one of two modes of having contact with other people. I-it relationships are characterized by their non-personal and instrumental quality. People act in this mode as if the other is not more than an object. It is a way of keeping maximum interpersonal distance, a way to avoid authentic personal connection and not to feel touched by the life circumstances of the other. In maintaining I-it relationships, the other is also easily characterized as totally different, which can lead to misconduct

towards the other (Schneider, 2013). Bohart et al. (2013) argue that offenders are often portrayed as pure evil, because non-offenders often don't own their own dark side and project it on the offender. Unfortunately, this can lead to alienation and social exclusion of the offender. It remains an open question whether this mechanism could explain why some of the former friends and relatives of the participants literally took distance from them once they were imprisoned. Stillman et al. (2009) discovered how social exclusion leads to a general loss of meaning.

We wonder if it's a coincidence that the participants primarily tried to cope through social and emotional support from others through *I-Thou relationships* and finally, that they expressed that the main source of their meaning in life was to be found in their deepened relationships with their family. Buber (1923/2003) describes I-Thou-relationships – in contrast to I-it contacts - as relationships that are marked by meeting the other person as a full human being. Mearns and Cooper (2005) argue that moments of I-Thou contact have the capacity to change both parties who are part of the relationship. Interestingly, Maruna (2001) described how having the feeling of being fully seen by another person can evoke a process of searching for meaning and deep personal change in offenders. Elisha et al. (2013) also found that feeling accepted by others was essential for prisoners to take steps towards personal change. In this study, prisoners felt accepted by others because the other took them seriously. At the same time, these others also requested that the prisoners make personal changes.

Although the reported posttraumatic growth and new meanings also reflect a process in the participant's internal world, our findings seem to suggest that this process towards growth was predominantly experienced in the relational dimension of

life. This is a hypothesis that should be further explored in the future, and it would make sense for a number of reasons. Ronel and Segev (2014) suggest that the core of crime is to be found in an existential alienation from others. In a way, this means that if there would be one area of growth that would make a difference in the offender's life, it would be relational growth. Furthermore, Maruna (2001) also found that the new emerging meanings in life were less self-centered and that there was a wish to serve others.

In this study, we also found a possible connection between the areas of growth. As Rogers (1961) argued, personal growth is marked by an increasing openness towards one's inner experience. In our sample, we found that the different elements of growth were connected by this growing openness. As Braswell and Wells suggested (2014), the result of the loss of meaning is often experienced as emptiness. In their perspective, emptiness also means that there is a potential openness to new experiences. In our sample, this openness helped the participants to reflect in a more open way, to explore the consequences of their crime and to make sense of their life stories. Openness to experience and a more nuanced way of thinking also made it possible to connect with people in a different way. The reported growth also seemed to be the fruits of a more open way of experiencing, because it didn't prevent the participants from experiencing the ongoing pains that were also part of their prison experience.

These two findings – the relational change on one hand and the inner openness to experience on the other hand – are complimentary. In a way, a personal change is always a relational change: the inner relationship with ourselves very often reflects our outer relationships with others and with the world, and vice versa (Vanhooren, 2006).

Finally, the participants highlighted the importance of choice. In their opinion, the prisoner him or herself is responsible for the way he or she relates to and copes with the prison circumstances and with the experienced losses. In their experience, the choice regarding how to deal with incarceration would also have an influence on their societal rehabilitation. Maruna (2001) found that individuals who succeed in desisting from crime differ from persisting offenders by the fact that they developed very different meanings in life, and also by developing a new sense of responsibility. Desisting offenders take responsibility for making important choices in life. This shows how existential themes such as meaning, choice and responsibility are interconnected. Making choices helps to construct new meanings, and new meanings also give direction for making choices (Maddi, 2012).

For offenders, taking responsibility for what happened and making life-affirming choices are personal challenges. Frankl (1967) argues that in the case of guilt, offenders lose their freedom except for the freedom to choose the right attitude in how they cope with their guilt. He takes even one step further by saying that because they cannot undo what they have done, they have the responsibility to change themselves. In his opinion, the only way out of the 'wilderness' is to change. The participants in this study showed important elements of personal change and posttraumatic growth. In a way, they were paving their own way out of their wilderness and exploring new grounds to build their future lives.

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Chapter 7

Posttraumatic Growth during Incarceration: A Case Study from an Experiential-Existential Perspective

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Abstract

Life after a traumatic experience is never easy. This is certainly the case for victims. For many offenders, committing a crime might be a traumatic experience as well, and incarceration may confront them even more with the consequences of their deeds. Humanistic therapies are very suitable for encouraging clients to embark on an explicit meaning-making process. In this article, we explore with a case-study how experiential-existential therapy can foster meaning-making and posttraumatic growth in prisoners. With Diana, we started with identifying her global meanings, which had been threatened by her own actions. The therapy offered her a safe non-judgmental space where she could learn to explore all aspects of the crime she committed and its consequences. By processing her past in an experiential mode, she generated new meanings about herself, about others and about the meaning and purpose of her own life. Diana found new ways to meet her basic existential needs. She developed a more nuanced set of meanings and a richer pallet of coping skills that enable her to live her life in a more meaningful and in a better adjusted way.

15 Vanhooren, S., Leijssen, M., & Dezutter, J. (Conditionally Accepted). Posttraumatic Growth during Incarceration: A Case Study from an Experiential-Existential Perspective. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*.

Introduction

Although *posttraumatic growth* is a relatively new concept in the field of psychology, the phenomenon itself is probably as old as humankind (Joseph et al., 2012; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Ancient religious texts show us how men and women wrestled in times of life stress with many questions about themselves and about existence in general. Biblical characters like Jacob, Job, and Jonah gained new meaning and a stronger faith during challenging times. They established their special calling in life through the very wrestling they suffered through. Kierkegaard and Jaspers – both existential philosophers – also describe how experiences of despair and failure challenge people to relate in more authentic ways towards ones' self and the world (Gee et al., 2011; Jaspers, 1951/2003). In turn, scholars and researchers like Janoff-Bulman (1992, 2013), and many others (i.e. Dezutter & Corveleyn, 2012; Joseph et al., 2012; Park, 2010; Tedeschi & Calhoun 2004), would go on to translate the same phenomenon into a more contemporary psychological language: life stress and traumatic experiences can shake our basic assumptions or global meanings about ourselves and our answers to the existential givens. Posttraumatic growth is described as the result of an intensive period of working through the issues that have arisen in times of adversity (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). This kind of growth can be understood as a significant shift in a persons' connection to oneself, in stronger relationships with others, in a deeper appreciation for life, in an increased sense of personal strength, in different priorities, and in a richer spiritual life (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Although posttraumatic growth has been studied in many populations and circumstances (for an overview see Calhoun &

Tedeschi, 2006), the study of this phenomenon in offenders and prisoners is very new. Recent qualitative studies have reported explicit signals of this kind of growth in offenders (Elisha et al. 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014; Maphan & Hefferon, 2012; Vanhooren et al., 2015; van Ginneken, 2014). Posttraumatic growth in offenders is seen to be triggered by incarceration and by the committed crime, and is marked by important shifts in self-awareness and the self-concept, the appreciation of relationships, new purposes, and new meaning in life (Ferrito et al., 2012; Guse & Hudson, 2014; Maphan & Hefferon, 2012; Vanhooren et al., 2015; van Ginneken, 2014). Posttraumatic growth in this population is also marked by a deeper understanding of the severity and consequences of the committed crime (Elisha et al., 2012). Although these qualitative studies highlighted the possibility of posttraumatic growth, there is a lack of clarity about the therapeutic process that leads to posttraumatic growth in this population.

In this article, we want to illuminate with a case-study how posttraumatic growth can be achieved during incarceration and how psychotherapy encourages this development. We want to foster a deeper understanding of the entire process – starting with the loss of meaning that many experience as a consequence of their incarceration (Vanhooren et al., 2015). We also want to demonstrate how experiential and existential approaches offer a more profound understanding of the links between the crime, the underlying dynamics that initiate destructive patterns, and the process that leads to posttraumatic growth and desistance.

Introduction to the Case-Study

Method

For an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon, qualitative case-studies are often preferable over large quantitative studies (Merriam, 2009). Case-studies give us the opportunity to examine unique life experiences in their own context (Merriam, 2009). Although case-studies provide detailed and rich information, the value of a case-study depends on the sensitivity and the meaning-making process of the researcher. The rough data of this case-study consists of the experiences of both the therapist and the client. The therapist wrote notes during and after each session. The client also reflected on each session; her feedback was written down by the therapist. Eight months after finishing therapy, the client was interviewed and audio-taped by the therapist, a social worker, and a psychiatrist. The social worker and the psychiatrist worked independently from the therapist. In a subsequent meeting the three different interviews and the entire case was discussed. This discussion brought even more clarity about the decisive elements and stages in the therapy. We integrated the results of this discussion into our case-study.

Not different from any other human experience, a case-study only starts to make sense by the selection and the interpretation of the rough data. The significance of an experience only appears after a process is completed (Gendlin, 1996), and the meaning we derive from an experience usually draws on a set of global meanings that already exists prior to the new information (Park, 2010). In our case, our background theory of the experiential-existential approach (Leijssen, 2013; van Deurzen, 1997) served as our global meaning system to make sense of our therapeutic

encounter with this client. Based on the work of Binswanger, Boss, Buber, Jaspers and Tillich, the experiential-existential approach formulates that human existence is experienced in the conglomerate of our physical dimension (our relationship with our bodily life and our surroundings), the social dimension (the way we relate to others, our social roles etc.), the psychological dimension (the way we relate to ourselves, our identity, etcetera), and the spiritual dimension of our existence (the way we relate to the Transcendent, our meaning and purpose in life) (Leijssen, 2013; van Deurzen, 1997). This holistic model influenced our observations and influenced our selection of what made sense to write about. However, the particular experiences of this client gave us also the opportunity to deepen our understanding of experiential-existential therapy with prisoners, and subsequently modified our background theory. This in-depth study also allows us to illustrate our empirical findings on posttraumatic growth with prisoners (Vanhooren et al., 2015).

As a result of this meaning-making or selection process, the first part of our case-study will deal with the initial sessions (1-3) in which the client presents herself as a woman who faces the existential challenge of being incarcerated and who experiences a loss of meaning in every dimension of human existence. We will also focus on how therapy helped her to find new ways to cope with this loss of meaning. The second part of the case-study will focus on the middle stages of the therapy (sessions 4-13). Our attention is drawn here to the experiential exploration of the client's basic existential needs and how these needs are intertwined with the committed crime. We also see the client experimenting with new – and more adjusted – ways to meet her basic existential needs. In the closing stage (session 14-16) and in the follow-up session, we find the client integrating new meanings and making different choices about the future.

Diana was offered an *experiential-existential therapy* which is one of the many approaches of existential therapy (Leijssen, 2014; Madison, 2010, 2014; Todres, 2012). Experiential-existential therapy draws on the common theoretical underpinnings of existential psychotherapy (Cooper, 2003; Hoffman, 2009) as well as on the experiential theories and methodologies of Eugene Gendlin (1996) and Carl Rogers (1961). Instead of using an analytical framework to understand the client, experiential-existential therapy uses an experiential-phenomenological approach to encounter the client. Moreover, the therapist facilitates the client's awareness of her or his bodily-felt inner experiences in order to explore and express implicit personal issues and meanings in a direct way. By emphasizing the importance of the bodily felt meaning over cognitive meaning, experiential-existential therapy differs from other forms of existential therapy (Madison, 2014). In this way it strongly resembles focusing-oriented therapy (Todres, 2012) and other process-oriented forms of person-centered therapy (Cooper, 2012). The experiential-existential therapist will try to deepen the therapeutic moment-to-moment process by tuning in to the client's inner experience. Experiential-existential therapists frequently use *focusing* (Gendlin, 1996) and other experiential methods to help the client to become more aware of his or her implicit meanings, needs, and wishes (Leijssen, 2014). However, experiential-existential therapy distinguishes itself form person-centered and focusing-oriented therapy because the therapy is not solely process-oriented. The experiential-existential therapist is also interested in exploring certain themes such as the client's world assumptions, meaning in life, relationship with the limits of life, strengths, and talents (Cooper, 2012, Leijssen, 2014). In working with offenders the experiential-existential therapist will

also experientially explore the dark side of the client (Vanhooren, 2011).

In order to guarantee the clients' anonymity, we gave her the pseudonym 'Diana' and we changed a few details to guarantee her anonymity. Diana signed an informed-consent form and agreed to have the process and outcome of her therapy published.

Initial Information about the Client

Diana is a 35 year old single woman and a teacher. She was convicted for committing arson in the house of her ex-boyfriend. From a diagnostic point of view there were no signs of a personality disorder or psychopathy, but it was clear that Diana was suffering in many ways. Diana was a first-time prisoner in the prison of Brugge in Belgium. She asked for individual psychotherapy, which was delivered by CGG Prisma, a mental health clinic that provides psychotherapy in prison, with maximum confidentiality for the client.

In the past, Diana had experienced depressive episodes, which she had been hiding from the outside world. Ten years ago, Diana attempted to commit suicide after a relationship break-up. After a short stay in an emergency hospital Diana returned back home. There was no communication in her family about what had happened. Diana went to therapy for a couple of sessions but she declared that she felt alright and that therapy was no longer necessary. Instead, she just continued living as if nothing had happened. Diana explained to us that she had "erased" this dark period. Incarceration pushed her to remember this earlier dark period in her life. In contrast to her earlier life experiences, the experience of being incarcerated and having committed a crime

were too strong for Diana to deny. Relying on her formal ways of coping, she got stuck in judgmental ruminations and didn't know how to share her pain with other people. Diana hoped to find a way out of this emotional nightmare through psychotherapy. She wanted to figure out what caused her to commit the crime in the first place, in order to prevent impulsive actions in the future. With this information we started our weekly therapy which would end up as 16 sessions in total. The therapy stopped because of Diana's release from prison. Diana gave us permission to contact her for a follow-up session eight months later.

Facing the Existential Challenge (Sessions 1-3)

The Loss of Meaning

Stressful life situations that challenge a persons' fundamental beliefs or global meanings about oneself, the other and the world, often result in a deep existential crisis (Park, 2010). Imprisonment has been described as this kind of highly stressful situation (Liebling & Maruna, 2011). The entry period of confinement has been identified as a period of heightened vulnerability with higher rates of self-harm and suicide (Haney, 2003; Harvey, 2011). Prison tends to be a place where peoples' global meanings about themselves and about the world are challenged by the experience of incarceration itself (Vanhooren et al., 2015, Van Ginneken, 2014). As a consequence, confinement often means the onset of a deep personal crisis (Harvey, 2011; Maruna et al., 2006). This was also the case for Diana as we will demonstrate below.

The choice of how to deal with an existential challenge. In the first session, Diana described her situation as being

overwhelmed by absurdity. Nothing made sense to her: the fact that she committed a crime was inconceivable and being a prisoner felt surreal. On a rational level she could see that she might have committed the crime out of revenge because her boyfriend broke up with her. This reason still felt incomplete to Diana because it didn't explain why she actually committed a criminal act. She had never stepped over clear moral boundaries before. She couldn't identify herself as a person who would harm other people out of revenge. Diana kept repeating that the whole situation was absurd. She kept on searching for a reason why she committed the crime because it didn't make sense to her. For Camus (1942/1975), absurdity refers to the experience that our global meanings are threatened at the very moment. Feelings of absurdity and emptiness are strongly related with the breakdown of the global meaning system (Proulx, 2013). Emptiness can evolve in a chronic existential state, but it also contains an openness for change and posttraumatic growth (Braswell & Wells, 2014). Van Deurzen and Adams (2011) are very explicit about the fact that people who deny the existential challenge of finding new meaning in times of adversity might be worse off than before. They might get stuck in destructive ways of coping in a desperate attempt to deny their existential realities. Examples of coping by prisoners include: excessive control over one's environment and body by physical exercise or the use of drugs (physical dimension), the use of violent power over others or social withdrawal (social dimension), narcissism or self-destructive behavior (psychological dimension), and fanaticism or apathy (spiritual dimension) (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). Some of these coping mechanisms can be adaptive in an environment like prison as they may provide physical and emotional safety. But overall they have more harmful consequences in the long

run. The use of violence can impede successful societal reentry and withdrawal leads to estrangement from others in the outside world. The use of drugs can increase the likelihood of reoffending in a dramatic way (Haney, 2003; Irwin & Owen, 2011; Jamieson & Grounds, 2011, Phillips & Lindsay, 2011).

Many prisoners seem to make the choice to deny the existential challenge that goes along with their situation (Haney, 2003; Vanhooren, 2011). Instead of facing themselves and their lives in the light of the crime, prisoners often try to escape from this existential challenge by minimizing the consequences of their crime or even by blaming the victim for what happened (Mashi & Gibson, 2012; Vanhooren, 2006, 2011). Another way to escape from the existential demand to face one's self is to minimize the full awareness that one is incarcerated. Some prisoners call their cell their "room" or use medication or illegal drugs; others sleep during the day and engage in time-consuming activities to kill their prison time (Byrne & Howells, 2002; Condon et al., 2008; Crawley & Sparks, 2011; Walker, 2011). By using these forms of denial and by avoiding the existential challenge, the path might be opened for future recidivism (Phillips & Lindsay, 2011). Frankl (1967) argues that offenders have to take full responsibility for their crime by facing their guilt and by changing themselves because the crime itself cannot be undone.

Diana initially tried to deny her existential challenge. By imagining being somewhere else and avoiding contact with other prisoners (cf. infra), she tried to minimize her awareness of the reality that she was imprisoned. However, the longer Diana was imprisoned the more she became puzzled with the question why she committed the crime. This question became so glaring that it undermined her sense of identity and meaning in life in many ways. Out of despair she chose to enter psychotherapy. By making

this choice Diana made the first step towards posttraumatic growth.

Threatened global meanings in every dimension of human existence. In the first three sessions with Diana, we tried to assess the way her global meanings were challenged by her crime and her imprisonment. Identifying these threatened global meanings is one of the first steps to foster posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013), and is at the same time a basic skill in existential therapies (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). We took a rather systematic approach to gather this information, by applying the model of the four dimensions of human existence.

As for the *physical dimension* of being confined, Diana tried to deny the very fact that she was locked up in a prison. The bad food and the lack of basic comfort reminded her of the summer camps that she attended during her childhood. She imagined that she was at a kind of summer camp now with the other inmates. By transforming the actual situation with the help of a sweet memory, she minimized the confrontation with the actual conditions of the prison. However, there were cracks in her attempt to deny the physical dimension of her incarceration. One of her former ways to cope with stress had been running in the forest. This became impossible of course, and as time went by, Diana really missed the opportunity to run freely in the open air. Diana was also negligent of her physical appearance: she looked very tired and sloppy. She didn't take care of her hair, was wearing only one pair of clothes and gained a lot of weight.

Within this physical dimension, Diana was confronted with the existential question how to deal with the limitations of life. In the past, Diana had encompassed this important question and she was about to do the same thing in prison, by imagining being free. The reality would eventually catch up

with her, letting her experience the impossibility of running when she wanted to. This meant the loss of her former global meaning that she didn't have any physical limits in life. Paradoxically, the realization that she was imprisoned and limited gradually resulted in a sense of safety. The limits of prison evoked a certain sense of containment that she had missed before. This experience became an invitation to take more risks in life because she accepted the reality of her physical limits.

The *social dimension* of prison was even harder to deny. She found herself in a totally different social world. Diana didn't trust the other prisoners and had a hard time with the daily gossiping and aggressive outbursts of the other inmates. She attempted to cope with this situation by avoiding contact with the other prisoners. Luckily for her, her parents and friends didn't abandon her and visited her quite frequently. However, having visitors in prison was a complicated experience. Prior to her incarceration, Diana hadn't shared her true feelings with others. In prison, though, during meetings with her visitors, she could no longer pretend that everything was fine. This created a new field of tension in her interpersonal relations, and Diana didn't have an easy response to this new situation.

The first global meaning that was threatened was her personal conviction that all people liked her. The second global meaning that was challenged by the experience of interacting with her inmates was her idea that all people were good and equal. On a deeper level, Diana was challenged to find an answer to the existential question as to how to connect with others while remaining or becoming an authentic individual (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). The experience of having these two global meanings challenged, alongside her underlying question

as to how to relate to others in a more authentic way, created a significant amount of tension for her. At this stage of the therapy Diana was able to explore these losses and discovered her deeper fear that others would drop her as a friend and that relationships would cease to exist. As a start in her process of posttraumatic growth she could acknowledge her anxiety around interpersonal conflicts and differences.

Diana got completely stuck in the personal or *psychological dimension*. Losing her identity as a 'good person', she now tried to figure out how to define herself. In the past, Diana used to cope with negative feelings or situations simply by denying them, or – when denial was no longer possible – by self-analyzing her problems until she found a solution. In the time lapse between her crime and her incarceration, she had been able to continue in her life, pretending that nothing had happened. But once imprisoned, she could no longer deny the crime. She felt very guilty and ashamed of her impulsive act and of being imprisoned. As a result, Diana couldn't refrain from ruminating about why she'd committed the crime, because she couldn't come up with answers which she found satisfying. She strongly condemned herself and wished that she had gotten a life sentence. It is clear that Diana had to let go of the assumption that she only was a good person. The situation also challenged her to think about the question who she really was.

As for the *spiritual dimension* of her existence, Diana mourned the fact that she no longer had a spotless soul and that she might have lost her "place in heaven". Diana was surprised by her own words because she was an atheist. An excerpt of the therapy session illustrates how this spiritual realm was explored through focusing on her bodily felt sense of her loss.

T1: When you say that you lost your spotless soul, do you sense anything at the center of your body? Maybe take some time to feel how it is over there...

C1: Yes, I feel something here around my heart... A void, a loss. Yes...

T2: A void, a loss... around your heart. Something feels like a loss, a void over there.

C2: Yes, like I lost something very precious, something essential...

T3: You sense something around your heart, a loss of something very precious, something very essential...

C3: Yes, oh this is weird... It feels like I lost my place in heaven!

T4: Oh, you have the feeling that you lost something very precious, like your place in heaven...

C4: Yes, and this is strange. This is really how it feels! How weird, I don't believe in an afterlife or in God, but this is exactly how it feels...

Diana also expressed the feeling that her life just did not make sense anymore. Everything seemed to be absurd in one way or another. The pending existential questions were how to go on living in a period of loss and meaninglessness and how to find new meaning and purpose in life.

Psychotherapy as a Different Answer towards the Existential Challenge

From an experiential-existential point of view, the vehicle of therapeutic change is an offering of a radically different human experience in all four dimensions of existence. Especially in prison, psychotherapy is profoundly different from what prisoners experience in their daily life. Even on a basic physical level, simply being in the therapy office can make a small change. As Diana noticed when she entered the therapy room for the first time, there was no desk between her and the therapist. For her, it was the first time in months that she talked with a professional without there being a physical barrier between both parties. Also, the armchairs – nonexistent in the majority of the prison but common in therapy offices in the outside world as well as in prison – felt to her like a sign of basic care and human respect.

Psychotherapy also offers a different reality in the social realm. In general, the importance of the therapeutic relationship for change has been described by many studies (for an overview see Norcross, 2002). Research has also shown that attention for the therapeutic relationship and empathic understanding produce a better therapeutic outcome with offenders than confrontational styles and a limited focus on the negative (Beech & Hamilton-Giachritis, 2005; Marshall & Serran, 2004; McNeill et al., 2005; Ross et al., 2008). The therapeutic relationship itself is a very important means to recover from the loss of global meanings (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). For offenders, the therapists' acceptance is quite essential (Elisha et al., 2012). However, acceptance or unconditional positive regard should not be confused with the approval of criminal behavior. In the context of therapy acceptance means that the therapist can hold a space

for all kinds of emotions and thoughts of the client. In holding this space, the therapist gives the inner self of the client the right to exist. He or she communicates that the client is not a lost cause, and that there is still hope for change and a better life in the future. As we will see, the therapeutic relationship was of tremendous importance for Diana.

On the psychological level the experiential and existential therapist offers the client a specific approach towards his or her inner world that is often completely new for the client. Frequently, prisoners try to deny their inner world (Haney, 2003) as Diana initially did. Similarly, some prisoners judge themselves harshly for the crime and for being imprisoned. Instead of denying or judging, the therapist encourages the client to engage in a phenomenological and experiential exploration (Leijssen, 2014; van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). Research has shown that judgmental ruminating or evaluative emotional processing doesn't actually lead to a better adjustment to the new situation. Experiential exploration at the other hand fuels the creation of new constructive meanings, resulting in better adjustment (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2001; Park, 2010; Pascual-Leone et al., 2015; Rude et al., 2007; Watkins, 2004).

Last but not least, experiential-existential psychotherapy also addresses the search for meaning in an explicit way. In general, therapists underestimate the prisoner's need to talk about existential issues (Morgan & Winterowd, 2002). The experience of the loss of meaning and purpose in life during incarceration is very common (Maruna et al., 2006). With Diana, we saw how life didn't make sense to her anymore. Experiential-existential therapy offered her the opportunity to talk about her experience of having lost all meaning in life. Instead of persuading her to adopt one or another set of meanings, therapy helped her to

explore the loss of meaning itself. Going back to the source of this loss – the crime itself and its antecedents in her life story – will paradoxically lead her to a better understanding of herself and will help her to find new meaning in life (cf. infra).

In the first three sessions, the offering of these psychotherapeutic essentials helped Diana to find a different way to connect with herself over the four different dimensions. In the following excerpt, the therapist tries to initiate an experiential exploration and encourages Diana to reflect on what was happening.

Diana condemned herself very strongly for committing the crime. She couldn't find answers and this drove her – in her own words – "crazy". She didn't want to stop thinking about what had happened, and punished herself by refusing to sleep and by neglecting her physical appearance. She lost herself in obsessive judgmental thinking which led to punitive thoughts: she defined herself now as a "bad non-trustworthy person" and had to pay for it.

> C1: I am bad, bad, bad! I need to pay for it! I should stay in jail for the rest of my life! I don't want to eat anymore. I don't deserve to sleep!
>
> T1: I hear that something in you is very angry at yourself. It doesn't want you to eat or sleep, as if you don't deserve to grant yourself in very basic needs.
>
> C2: Right! Because I can't forgive myself! How could I?
>
> T2: Yes, there is a part of you, a voice that can't forgive you what you have done... It sounds that this voice wants you to pay for it... Wants you to suffer for it! I wonder Diana, why that voice is so strong in you. Why does it need to punish you so hard?

C3: I don't know… I have to sweat it out… It seems that this is the only way to deal with what I have done…

T3: The only way to deal with what you have done… I sense a kind of pain there…

C4: I am not a good person any more… I feel like being a monster, they must think I'm a monster… They can't trust me anymore, nor can I…

T4: The pain of having lost your reliability… You're not a trustworthy person anymore, not a good person anymore… It feels like being a monster…

C5: It's weird, but saying this makes me calm… It feels like I'm getting some control over myself here…

T5: How do you mean?

C6: Saying that I'm a monster feels like I'm getting some grip on myself.

T6: I hear you. It seems that calling yourself a monster helps you to get some grip on your situation…

C7: Strange… It seems like bullying myself is the only way to survive here… It's so hard… I can't imagine why I put that place in fire… I feel awful.

In this excerpt, the therapist didn't judge Diana's punitive voice or her *inner critic* (Stinckens et al., 2013) when it felt the need to speak (T1). At the same time, he encouraged Diana to explore why a part of herself felt the need to punish (T2). The therapist also accepted and acknowledged the pain that was related to her need for self-punishment (T3). For Diana, it became clear that the loss of her assumption to be a "good and trustworthy person" and her need to get control over herself were closely related to this punitive voice. Remarkably, by engaging in this more experiential and reflective search, stimulated by the therapist (T3, T4, T5),

the need to punish herself disappeared rather quickly during the first couple of sessions. Instead of maltreating herself, therapy helped her to experience her pain about her loss in a more direct and adjusted way (T3: I sense a kind of pain here… C7: It's so hard…I feel awful). Diana reported that by focusing on her pain in a direct way, sadness took the place of her punitive voice. As a result she could allow herself to sleep again.

Exploring Basic Existential Needs and the Link with Crime (Session 4-13)

Experiential Exploration of the Basic Existential Needs (Session 4-7)

Diana reported that her punitive voice was less present after the first three sessions. There was more space now for the actual exploration of what was most puzzling to her: the question why she committed the crime in the first place. Very different from cognitive-behavioral approaches, experiential and existential offender therapies focus on the exploration of the underlying dynamics of criminal behavior in terms of their basic existential needs (Braswell & Wells, 2014; Gunst, 2012; Ronel & Segev, 2014 Vanhooren et al., 2015; Ward & Fortune, 2014). Just like all human beings, offenders try to reach fulfillment of their existential needs, such as the need for efficacy, connectedness, love, and meaning (Braswell & Wells, 2014; Ward & Fortune, 2014). The way they try to fulfill their needs or the way they cope with the inability to reach their goals is often through unadjusted or anti-social behavior (Ward & Fortune, 2014). When the basic existential needs are not met, offenders gradually become stuck

in a *criminal spin*: a downward process marked by existential loneliness and alienation (Ronel & Segev, 2014).

In the subsequent sessions, Diana engaged in an experiential search process about the meaning of the crime in terms of her basic existential needs. It became clear that certain patterns, which had previously ruled her life most of the time, led to the impulsive act of the crime.

T1: I have been wondering, Diana, why you had the need to always be the good person... It also seems that you never had any conflict with anybody... Was this always the case?
C1: I don't know where it comes from... Yes, I was always the happy girl and everybody wanted to be my friend... Really...
T2: Oh... How was that for you?
C2: You know... I really felt lonely as a child! I had the feeling that nobody knew who I was!
T3: Just must have felt so lonely... Not even your parents and siblings?
C3: Especially not them! No, I was hiding from them... I didn't want my parents to see how angry I was at them!
T4: You were hiding your anger, you didn't want them to know how angry you were at them! It seemed to be important to hide that angry part of yourself?
C4: Yes...
T5: Any idea why...?
C5: I was scared that they wouldn't love me anymore...

In this excerpt the therapist initiated an experiential exploration of her dark side (T1). Intrigued by how Diana seemed to split her reality between "good" and "bad" in previous sessions he decided to explore this theme. Knowing that the dark side

often refers to important needs, he literally used the word "need" in the first intervention (T1). Paradoxically, instead of exploring the crime he started to explore her need to be "good" and her tendency to avoid conflicts. Knowing that her crime was very conflict-laden, he assumed that there was a connection between the underlying dynamics of the crime and the origins of her need to "always be good" to others. Rather than rely on an intellectual search for the origins of her need to be good, the exploration evoked lively memories (C1). She was in direct contact with her felt senses that accompanied her memories. The therapist followed this track and invited her to reflect on how it was to be that "happy child" (T2). Interestingly, this simple intervention helped Diana to unfold the felt sense of her childhood. For the outside world she was that happy child but inside she felt lonely and disconnected (C2). Her experience became even more vivid when she realized that she was hiding from her parents (C3). Attuned to the client's experiential process, the therapist validated Diana's words (T4). At the same time he encouraged her to explore her felt meaning of "hiding that angry part for yourself" (T4). The core of this felt meaning became explicit in C5. As a child Diana was scared that she would be rejected if showed her anger.

Diana discovered gradually that her life had being marked by a profound experience of existential loneliness. Since childhood, she had developed an incongruence between her outer self – the happy popular child – and her inner world: a place where sad and angry feelings were hidden from the outside world. She was scared of being rejected by significant others if she would show them her true self. As a result, she had the feeling that people didn't know who she was, and became more lonely.

As time went by, Diana identified more and more with that outer person who was "always happy". She distorted her self-

experience, and also resisted experiencing the darker sides of life in general. In this way, Diana's loneliness caused a form of existential alienation from reality. In partner relationships for instance, Diana shut herself down from the negative feelings or her own relational needs. In only paying attention to positive feelings, Diana created a kind of a fairy tale reality wherein everything had to be good and beautiful.

In distorting reality and losing connection with herself, Diana had a hard time knowing what was meaningful or important to her in life. Being gifted in many ways, she was successful nonetheless, whether she engaged fully in her activities or studies or not. Diana couldn't tell if she was living the life she wanted to live.

In discovering all these patterns, Diana realized that her past suicide attempt and the crime she committed made sense in the context of her existential loneliness, the distortion of her reality, and her meaningless life. Both destructive episodes were linked with the downfall of this "fairy tale reality". Both times this led to an outburst of self-destructive or destructive behavior. It also became clear what she had to do to prevent another explosion in the future. Instead of hiding negative feelings towards herself and towards others she started to acknowledge the complexity of her inner experience. She learned to communicate about her feelings in a constructive way. At this point in the therapy, the crime felt less "absurd" to her and the symptoms disappeared at the same time.

Finding New Ways to Meet Basic Existential Needs (Session 8-13)

Gradually it became clear that Diana previously had fulfilled her basic existential needs for acceptance and love by distorting her self-experience and her perception of the reality. As a consequence, she became estranged from significant others and from herself. In a more concrete way, she avoided conflicts in her relationships and didn't even know if she really loved her partner or not. She also didn't know what she liked or wanted in general. This resulted in wrong choices about studies and work, and the experience of life being quite meaningless. As a result, her existential need to live a meaningful life (Frankl, 1946/2006) was also unfulfilled.

The potential for growth for Diana lay in becoming more connected to her inner experience and allowing herself a full range of feelings. Step by step she learned to tolerate reality rather than to escape from it. Going into therapy was Diana's first step towards acknowledging her inner reality. Talking about her inner punitive voice and the crime were other important steps. The presence of the therapist helped her refrain from avoiding certain parts of herself. Diana explained how speaking out loud during the sessions helped her to be more aware of her inner self. The ongoing sequence of experiential explorations and her attempts to give words to her inner experience helped her to be more in touch with reality.

Diana gradually opened up to the different layers of her situation, after she was encouraged to explore her thoughts, feelings, and bodily felt senses. Instead of thinking or talking about her experiences, focusing (Gendlin, 1996) helped her to be aware of her bodily felt senses about the situation in the here-and-now

and to open up to new aspects of her internal and interpersonal reality. By learning to be open to her experience and realizing that her "negative" feelings were accepted by the therapist, Diana felt less of a need to deny or distort her inner and outer world. She could see how her next challenge was mobilizing the courage to be her real self in the presence of others.

Aware of this shift, the therapist encouraged her to show her vulnerable, depressive, angry, and other "unhappy" sides to her friends and family as well. In the next session Diana reported that she had indeed made herself vulnerable with her visitors and took steps to let others take care of her. For the first time in her life she had a very honest and confrontational talk with her father. Previously scared that others would reject her if she wasn't the "happy Diana", she was surprised to learn that her family still loved her. Diana experienced a lot of sorrow, noticing that it took a crime for her to realize that her family wouldn't reject her in the end.

As therapy went on, she stopped calling herself a "lost cause" or an entirely bad person. Former aspects of her global meanings about herself – being an entirely good person, the idea of knowing herself completely and not being in need of help from others - shifted to more balanced and nuanced meanings. Diana could see that if she didn't accept all the different parts of herself, she would never be able to build a stable relationship with a new partner, nor live a life that would be meaningful to her.

Owning, Integrating, and Living Life (Sessions 14-16 and follow-up)

Concluding Sessions (14-16)

The ending stages of experiential and existential therapies are often marked by a higher openness to experience, integrative tendencies towards different aspects of one's self, a different stance towards others, higher levels of meaningfulness and the making of better choices towards the future (Cooper, 2003; Rogers, 1961). Or to put it in terms of posttraumatic growth: a changed experience of one's self, a different appreciation of relationships, and a changed philosophy of life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). With Diana, the last sessions of therapy were marked by deeper explorations, higher levels of experiencing and more openness to all angles of difficult subjects. Now that she had been growing in openness to her inner experience, she could explore her darker side in a more profound way. As a result, Diana developed a stronger ownership over the consequences of her crime and also stronger agency over her life in general.

Diana heard that the victims of her crime portrayed her as a misleading and manipulative person. Even though Diana genuinely felt guilty about her crime, she had a hard time hearing that negative portrayal and became confused. In the following session, she wondered if she was indeed manipulative. Could it be that people felt manipulated because she didn't show what she really felt? She could understand that her ex-partner must have felt really deceived by her. Interestingly, in the same session she argued with the therapist about something she didn't agree on with him. Apparently, she was brave enough now not to run away from conflicts and allowed herself to stand firm by her own experience.

Another topic that became a more direct subject of exploration was that she had avoided taking risks in life. Concerned about failure, Diana never fully engaged in sports, arts, studies, or work. In fact, by avoiding taking risks, Diana realized now that she had never fully lived before. In retrospect, she felt – in her own words – "stupid" for not having used her full capacities in the past. She realized she had been handicapping herself in many ways. The therapist confronted her with the fact that in the end she fulfilled her worst case scenario of failure: she spent time in prison and would have a criminal record which would make it harder in the future to accomplish what she wanted. The therapist challenged her to live more fully instead of avoiding risks, precisely because she had already hit rock bottom. Initially this intervention confused her but eventually she felt a burden fall from her shoulders. Indeed, if the worst case scenario had already happened there was little risk in living life more fully. In the last session, Diana asserted that she was now fully aware that she really had to live her life and that she would have to make her own choices. Diana realized that her life was finite and that there was no time to waste. It also was very clear that she would have to listen to herself, learn to trust herself, and stay in touch with reality. Life was real and worth living.

Follow-up Interview

After 16 sessions, the therapy was finished due to Diana's release from prison. There was a follow-up interview eight months later. In that time, began to make some important decisions in her life. She started studying again so she could change jobs in the future. She decided to become a social worker: "This

was always what I wanted". She was also more open towards her friends when things weren't going well. Being more aware of the reality now Diana could experience how she had doubts about the future. She was still struggling on many levels with the fact that she had been a prisoner. Since Diana couldn't live in a fairy tale world anymore, she was trying to live now with many uncertainties. Taking everything into consideration, Diana concluded that the experience of incarceration turned her into a better and "happier" (her own words) person.

Conclusions

It seems clear that Diana showed signs of posttraumatic growth during her incarceration. Diana went through changes on many levels, covering shifts in Calhoun and Tedeschi's three factor model of posttraumatic growth (2013): a changed sense of self, changed relationships and a changed philosophy of life. From an experiential-existential point of view we witnessed Diana making important shifts in every dimension of her existence. On the physical dimension, Diana started to take better care of her physical appearance at the end of therapy, and she also listened more closely to her bodily felt senses. She became more aware of the fact that her life was finite and that her body was vulnerable. On the social dimension, Diana moved into more authentic relationships. Diana confirmed that she stayed more open in relationships with friends afterwards. In her experience, incarceration also widened her social world, having met so many people who were so different from her. On the psychological level, Diana experienced important shifts in her self-knowledge and her self-concept, which allowed positive and negative self-experiences. And finally, on the spiritual level, Diana took

important steps towards a more meaningful life.

Diana found new ways to meet her basic existential needs. Previously, her needs for intimacy, contact, and meaning were met through ways that led her to destructive behavior. Denying large parts of who she was, in order to engage with people, resulted in existential alienation and isolation. Diana's posttraumatic growth gave her important keys to desist from crime.

Diana learned to live with the paradoxes of life. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2012) refer to this state of being as "wisdom". Wisdom is the summit of what people can reach through posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2012). Wisdom as a basic assumption doesn't prevent life from being painful from time to time. On the contrary, wise people demonstrate a remarkable amount of resilience in times of life stress because they accept ambiguity as the true nature of things.

As in the case of Diana, therapy might help prisoners to engage in a deeper constructive meaning-making process and foster posttraumatic growth (Ferrito et al., 2012; Mapham & Hefferon, 2012). Humanistic therapies have a long tradition of guiding clients towards growth and may be specially suited for this task (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013, Joseph, 2011). With this case-study, we highlighted the importance of the experiential exploration of the unmet basic existential needs, the processing of current and older issues in a more experiential mode, the generating of new meanings, and the integration of the different parts of the self.

Posttraumatic growth emerges if the client is willing to face existential challenges that were triggered by a stressful life event. In the case of prisoners, facing ones existential challenges is not merely a chance for a better life. Taking one's existential challenges seriously means also taking responsibility for the consequences of the crime towards the victim, the society and one's self.

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Chapter 8

General Conclusions

We began this doctoral dissertation with the basic question of how prisoners relate to meaning during their incarceration. Drawing on Park's meaning-making model (2010), the concept of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), the concepts of meaning and search for meaning (Steger et al., 2006; Steger et al., 2008), and our clinical experience, we delineated six specific research questions:

1. Does incarceration lead to a loss of meaning, and is this accompanied with distress?
2. Which coping strategies predict posttraumatic growth during incarceration?
3. Is posttraumatic growth associated with less distress?
4. Are there different profiles of meaning and search for meaning among prisoners?
5. How are the experienced loss of meaning, ways of coping, and new meanings (meanings made) connected on a content level?
6. How can meaning-making and posttraumatic growth be supported in therapy during incarceration?

In the previous six chapters, we presented provisional answers to these research questions. In this closing chapter, we will reflect on the main findings of the different studies incorporated in this dissertation. We will then address the general limitations of these studies and we will outline some directions for future research.

Main Findings

Loss of Meaning and Distress during Incarceration

The first research question referred to the basic tenet of the meaning-making model, which is that a threat to a meaning system leads to the experience of distress (Park, 2010). Qualitative studies documented that some prisoners experience a loss of meaning as a consequence of being incarcerated (Maruna et al. 2006, van Ginneken, 2014). In our pilot study (Chapter 4), a participant described how incarceration led to a deflation of his meaning in life: "Eventually I started to ask myself the question: why on earth I had to stay alive?" Similarly, a participant in our qualitative study (Chapter 6) describes how incarceration affected his meaning and reason to be alive: "You enter prison and your whole life is destroyed. Everything that once was certain becomes uncertain. I'm not sure if I still have the right to live. Everybody wants to mean something in life. If I died right now my life wouldn't have had any meaning at all."

In our cross-sectional study with 365 prisoners, we operationalized loss of meaning as the difference between perceived meaning before incarceration and meaning experienced during incarceration (Chapter 2). In this study we found evidence that higher levels of loss of meaning were indeed associated with higher levels of distress. Although differences in prison regime also explained differences in levels of distress among the prisoners, the prison regime didn't influence individuals' experience of loss of meaning.

Within the prison population we found some diversity. First, we discovered that un-sentenced prisoners experienced more loss of meaning and distress than sentenced prisoners. In fact,

being an un-sentenced prisoner amplified distress created through loss of meaning. Second, older prisoners seemed to lose more meaning in life as a consequence of incarceration compared to younger prisoners. Being older, they might take life more seriously and having less time ahead of them to live, they might be more aware of their loss of meaning (Crawley & Sparks, 2011).

Although the mean level of loss of meaning showed that the "average" prisoner experienced loss of meaning during incarceration, there were also prisoners who experienced higher levels of meaning during their incarceration. This higher meaning might have been the result of successful coping with earlier experiences of loss of meaning. The limitations of a cross-sectional set-up made it impossible to check this.

Coping and Posttraumatic Growth

The second research question referred to meaning-making processes. Park (2010) distinguishes different meaning-making processes or coping strategies that either lead to assimilation of the appraised meaning – which would not lead to an adjustment of the meaning system and certainly not to posttraumatic growth (Joseph, 2011) – or to accommodation, which would lead to new meaning and posttraumatic growth.

In our pilot study (Chapter 4) and in our qualitative study (Chapter 6) we found that participants coped in different ways with incarceration. In both studies, most of the offenders coped with incarceration by seeking emotional and social support, which led to posttraumatic growth (accommodation). In our pilot study (Chapter 4), one participant explained: "There was one guard who took some time for me now and then. He asked me

how I was doing and he was really interested in me. He gave me the feeling that I was still a human being. Afterwards I realized how important it is to take care of other people. Not for your own interest, but for the sake of the other." Another common way of coping with the situation was through religion. In our qualitative study (Chapter 6), a female prisoner explained how religion helped her to survive: "Religion is keeping me now from committing suicide. I pray a lot and I read the Bible. The stories in the Bible help me to understand what is happening here and tell me that life isn't easy. That comforts me". Another recurrent coping strategy in our pilot study and in our quantitative study was an active search for meaning: "You start to reflect on the meaning of your life. Shouldn't I have done things differently?" Our qualitative study also reported avoidant coping strategies such as substance use (Chapter 6). In the literature, we found other coping strategies used by offenders which probably would not lead to posttraumatic growth, such as denial of the situation and behavioral disengagement.

In our cross-sectional quantitative study (Chapter 3), we found confirmation that coping strategies such as seeking emotional support, turning to religion and searching for meaning all support posttraumatic growth during incarceration. Coping strategies which are usually identified as assimilative meaning-making processes, such as denial and substance use (Joseph, 2011), were not significantly associated with posttraumatic growth. Behavioral disengagement as a coping strategy clearly led to lower levels of growth. Behavioral disengagement has also been associated with lower levels of posttraumatic growth in non-offender populations (Triplett et al., 2012). Behavioral disengagement might be explained by a lack of coping skills, a lack of courage to deal with the experience of failure, or a lack of

hardiness (Maddi, 2014). In this case, a prisoner would experience loss of meaning as a result of incarceration and the crime that led to it, but would give up trying to find new global meanings (Triplett et al., 2012). In this case, posttraumatic growth would not occur. Our findings seem to support this idea.

We also found that psychotherapy and chaplain support during incarceration supported posttraumatic growth (Chapter 3). Older prisoners seemed to find it harder to experience posttraumatic growth, which has also been observed in non-offender populations (Milam, 2006). Prisoners who were more highly educated also experienced less growth compared to their counterparts. This confirmed our earlier discovery in the pilot study (Chapter 4). We didn't find any explanation for this association.

Posttraumatic Growth and Distress

The third research question reflected the next stage in the meaning-making model: new meanings and posttraumatic growth would lead to less distress. Our pilot-study with 30 sex offenders (Chapter 4) confirmed that higher levels of posttraumatic growth were associated with lower levels of distress. The participants in this study described how posttraumatic growth was accompanied by feelings of hope, relief, and by the belief that their life was not fully wasted after all. They experienced a deeper appreciation of relationships, more self-knowledge, and less self-centered purposes and meanings in life. Our qualitative study (Chapter 6) and our case study (Chapter 7) also illustrated the fact that once the participants experienced posttraumatic growth they felt less distressed than before. They made a distinction between their early prison experiences, which were accompanied by despair,

and their current experience, which was usually associated with more hope. With their new strengths such as perseverance, long-term planning, asking for help when necessary, relational skills, and having faith in change, the participants who experienced posttraumatic growth felt better equipped for the future.

Profiles of Presence of Meaning and Search for Meaning

The fourth research question approached meaning from a different angle. The meaning-making model assumes that people search for meaning when they are not experiencing meaning and that they find meaning when they search for it (Park, 2010). Other studies, however, have shown that this is not always the case (Steger et al., 2008). Alternative theoretical approaches suggest that individuals reveal important differences in how they relate to experiencing meaning and search for meaning (Dezutter et al., 2013, 2014, 2015).

Our fourth study helped us to differentiate how prisoners relate to the experience of meaning and search for meaning (Chapter 5). We discovered four different profiles based on the scores of prisoners' experience of meaning and search for meaning. Prisoners with profiles that were marked by higher levels of meaning (High Presence High Search, and High Presence, Low Search) showed less distress, more positive world assumptions, including higher levels of self-worth, and more care for others compared to prisoners with profiles that were marked with lower levels of meaning (Low Presence High Search and Low Presence Low Search). Prisoners with a profile that was characterized by lower levels of meaning and lower levels of search for meaning showed a severe lack of meaning compared with people who shared the same profile in non-offender populations (Dezutter et

al., 2013, 2014, 2015). Moreover, older prisoners and prisoners with a history of having been sexually abused during childhood were overrepresented in this last category. The fact that prisoners with this profile experience very low levels of meaning and don't seem to search for new meaning might be regarded as alarming.

The Connection between Loss, Meaning-making, and New Meanings

The fifth question connected the different stages of the meaning-making model as a whole. Because Park (2010) emphasizes the importance of the content of the new meanings (meanings made), we were interested in the content of new meanings made among prisoners and how these new meanings were connected with their initial prison experiences, their loss of meaning, and their coping strategies.

In a qualitative study with ten prisoners, we explored whether there were connections between these different stages and the new meanings made (Chapter 6). In this study, the prisoners highlighted the role of relationships with others on the pathway to posttraumatic growth. First, their initial prison experiences were marked by interpersonal distress. The participants described the dehumanizing conduct of certain prison guards. This dehumanizing conduct made a deep impression on the prisoners, leaving them with the feeling that they were not a person anymore. At the same time, most of the participants also experienced relationship breakdowns with partners and friends.

Second, prisoners coped especially well by seeking emotional and social support from loyal friends, family members, sympathetic guards, and professionals. Through contact with

these people prisoners experienced being fully seen as a human being.

Third, the participants of this study experienced posttraumatic growth and new meanings as a result of their meaning-making process. Most participants referred to their children and other family members as their most important source of meaning. Their experience of posttraumatic growth was marked by increased relational skills.

Alongside this relational pathway to posttraumatic growth the participants also experienced a changed inner relationship with themselves. This inner process mirrored their process in relationship to others. Some participants experienced estrangement from themselves and doubted if they still had the right to live. Later on, an inner search for meaning and religious coping were used to reconnect with one's self and with life in general. Posttraumatic growth and new meanings were marked by a changed inner relationship, allowing more openness to one's inner experience.

Meaning-making and Posttraumatic Growth in Psychotherapy

The final research question brought us back to the clinical reality. How can we support meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth among prisoners? As we described in our pilot study with 30 sex offenders, explicit attention to meaning, meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth is not a regular ingredient in forensic therapies (Chapter 4). Creating a space for processing the loss of former meanings, for meaning-making processes, and for posttraumatic growth could increase clients' motivation for therapy. Our case study showed a more detailed description of how meaning-making and posttraumatic

growth could be supported during incarceration (Chapter 7). From the pilot study and the case study, we can identify important supportive elements.

First, meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth won't emerge if the client doesn't experience a loss of meaning and a certain level of distress. Although, this sounds very obvious, this is important in the context of forensic therapies. In Belgium, therapy for offenders usually only starts after an individual's release from prison. At that point clients might have lost the inner need and the motivation to work on their problems. In order to support accommodative meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth, therapy should start as early as possible (i.e.in prison), when the offender still experiences the distress that goes along with the loss of meaning.

Second, therapy supports a choice to face one's losses and to deal with the existential challenge of the situation. Offenders who don't want to face the existential challenge to revise their life or who don't want to change clearly make a different choice. Posttraumatic growth and new meanings in life can't be acquired if the client does not want to face the existential challenge on a personal level.

Third, if the client makes the choice of therapy, the significance of the lost meanings should be explored in a non-judgmental way. The exploration of the lost meanings is a first step towards engaging in an active meaning-making process (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). By searching for the significance of the lost meanings, the client is already exploring what is essential to her or to him in life. Especially in a prison setting, this process needs a non-judgmental and empathic attitude from the therapist (Marshall & Serran, 2004).

Fourth, therapy is an active meaning-making process by itself. Experiential exploration stimulates the creation of new meaning (Greenberg & Pascual-Leone, 2001; Pascual-Leone et al., 2015). The therapeutic relationship also supplies the necessary emotional support to cope with the acceptance of loss of meaning, to encourage new meaning-making, and to support posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013).

Fifth, therapy encourages the exploration of existential themes. Addressing existential questions such as one's purpose in life have been found to support the emergence of new meanings in life (Breitbart & Popitto, 2014; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). In the case of offenders, it is necessary to explore the basic existential need that accompanied the crime. The exploration of this existential need provides important information not only in terms of considering a way out of crime, but also in terms of leading a more pro-social and meaningful life.

Sixth, the therapist can encourage the client to experiment with new pro-social ways to meet their basic existential needs in and outside therapy.

Finally, the therapist can support the client to make new decisions and to take steps in his or her life based on the newly-emerged meaning in life.

We discovered that there are groups of prisoners who might need particular help in order to cope with their loss of meaning and to find new meanings in life. Older prisoners have been found to experience higher levels of loss of meaning and lower levels of posttraumatic growth (Chapter 2 and 3). They are also overrepresented in the group of prisoners who have a profile that is characterized by lower levels of meaning and lower levels of search of meaning (Chapter 5). Although more research is needed to explore what exactly is going on with older prisoners,

it is clear that they could use more help. Prisoners with a history of being sexually abused and prisoners who experienced violence during childhood were also overrepresented in meaning profiles with lower levels of meaning (Chapter 5). This confirms Haney's findings (2012) that prisoners with a traumatic background need special care during incarceration.

General Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this doctoral dissertation should of course be interpreted in light of several limitations. Although we included mixed methods, a longitudinal study would have been interesting in order to test causal relationships between the different study variables such as the loss of meaning, meaning-making processes, and posttraumatic growth. In ideal circumstances, the offenders' meaning of life and level of distress could have been measured before incarceration, during incarceration, at the time of release, and at a later point when they are back in society. Meaning-making processes, the search for meaning and posttraumatic growth could then have been measured before, during, and after incarceration. However, the reality of situations leading to imprisonment and the nature of life in prison are not ideal for conducting this kind of research. Often, prisoners in Belgium are unexpectedly released or switched to other prisons. The majority of prisoners are released in the first couple of months of their incarceration. In line with Belgian law on privacy, the addresses to which prisoners move after release are not communicated.

In one of our studies (Chapter 2) we used a new instrument to measure the loss of meaning. This instrument has not yet been validated. Until this measure is validated or these results

have been duplicated, every conclusion of that study has to be understood as provisional. In fact, because all quantitative studies (Chapters 2 to 5) in this dissertation have been unique, duplication is needed for every study.

One of the shortcomings of the research is that we didn't include measures that assessed risk of recidivism, criminal thinking, and societal adjustment. Two instruments which would assess these variables were originally included in our study. However, the Societal Adjustment Scale (Van Tongeren & Klebe, 2010) and the Amorality-subscale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory – 2 (MMPI-2) (Butcher et al., 1989; Osberg & Poland, 2001) did not reach the required level of reliability in our sample. As a consequence, the results of these particular instruments could not be included in our studies. We hope that future studies on meaning would include (different) measures of criminal thinking, and, in the best case, also measures of recidivism and desistance from crime.

Our qualitative studies have been focused on successful meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth. However, qualitative studies on meaning-making processes among prisoners who don't experience posttraumatic growth could be revealing as well. For example, a more in-depth study on meaning-making processes among older prisoners and prisoners who are highly educated could teach us why these subgroups have a harder time making meaning during incarceration. Another subgroup of prisoners that it would be important to study are those prisoners who radicalize during incarceration. Although one could argue that becoming more fundamentalist is also a result of a meaning-making process, this kind of meaning made is very different from posttraumatic growth. Essentially, posttraumatic growth is about the discovery of self-transcendent

values, and about becoming more connected with oneself, with others, and with the mystery of life (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013). Schneider (2013) describes fundamentalism as a consequence of adopting a *polarized mind*. This mindset is characterized by dogmatic and polarized thinking and by denial of the ambiguous nature of life. It would be interesting for future studies to explore the meaning-making processes that lead to fundamentalism during incarceration.

Our qualitative studies (Chapters 4, 6, and 7) showed us that psychotherapy can support meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth during imprisonment. However, our related quantitative study included only a very basic measure of psychotherapy attendance. Although we found that psychotherapy attendance was associated with higher levels of posttraumatic growth (Chapter 3), more detailed measures are necessary to explore this connection. In other populations, meaning-making interventions have proven to be evidence-based and to enhance well-being and meaning in life (Breitbart & Poppito, 2014). A next step would be to study the effect of meaning-making interventions in the context of psychotherapy among prisoners.

Finally, we restricted our sample to prisoners who speak Dutch, the official language in the Northern part of Belgium. But a certain minority in the Belgian prisons are foreign nationals who only speak their native language, such as Arabic, Russian, etcetera. The downside of this restriction is that we did not include this part of the prison population. We hope that future studies would focus on meaning among prisoners from cultural minorities.

Some Concluding Thoughts

Starting from zero, we explored different elements of meaning, meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth among prisoners. We discovered that prison distress can partly be explained by a loss of meaning. We also found that prisoners do indeed search for meaning and that this leads to more posttraumatic growth. We discovered that not every prisoner searches for meaning, even when his or her life seems rather meaningless. Prison staff, guards and family can make a positive difference by being really interested in the personal stories of the prisoners. Therapy can support meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth among prisoners.

It is clear that including existential issues in therapy facilitates healing and growth in individuals. More research is needed to comprehend the full complexity of meaning-making processes and posttraumatic growth among prisoners. A deeper understanding of the existential challenges of prisoners can help them to desist from crime and to lead a more meaningful and pro-social life in the future.

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