The phenomenological experience of posttraumatic growth in the context of a traumatic bereavement

Kerry Acheson

Supervisor: Dr. Roelf van Niekerk

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ABSTRACT

The present study involves an exploration of the phenomenological experience of posttraumatic growth in the context of a traumatic bereavement. An idiographic case study of a student who had witnessed her mother's death twelve years previously was conducted. Semi-structured interviews elicited data which was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Posttraumatic growth was found to have developed with regards to self-perception, relationships, and also in a broader spiritual and existential domain. The findings of this study shed light on the extant posttraumatic growth literature. In particular, findings were discussed in relation to the posttraumatic growth model as proposed by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006). As posttraumatic growth is a relatively young concept, further research is needed in order to understand the meaning of reported growth more fully. While posttraumatic growth has been investigated in the context of bereavement, future research should distinguish more clearly between growth following traumatic and non-traumatic bereavement. Posttraumatic growth has received minimal empirical attention in South Africa, and therefore exploration of this area is suggested in the future.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter serves to introduce and orientate the reader to this study. This involves a brief definition of the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth as well as an illumination of its relevance as a focus of South African research. This is followed by a statement of the aims of this research as well as an overview of subsequent chapters.

1.1 The Value of Researching Posttraumatic Growth in South Africa

Within the South African context, the high incidence of poverty, HIV/AIDS and crime culminate in high levels of traumatic encounters (The Independent Project's Trust, 2002). In post-Apartheid South Africa, "thousands are struggling with the impact of human rights abuses and economic and social hardship" (Edwards, 2005, p. 126). This renders trauma-orientated studies particularly relevant. While the incidence of trauma in South Africa is cause for concern, the bulk of existing trauma research has focused on the negative effects of trauma. This continues to be a necessary and relevant focus. However, there has been a shift in the psychological literature away from an exclusive focus on the negative effects of trauma, towards a broader view that includes strengths and growth potential. This has led to the development of the concept of *posttraumatic growth*, which can be defined as "the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life crises" (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004, p. 1).

The idea that the struggle with adversity can lead to positive life changes allows for a hopeful and affirming perspective of trauma (Tedeschi & Kilmer, 2005). Posttraumatic growth therefore warrants further empirical attention. The concept of posttraumatic growth has been described as bridging the fields of traumatology and positive psychology (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). As expressed by Helen Keller: "Character cannot be developed in ease and quiet. Only through experience of trial and suffering can the soul be strengthened, vision cleared, ambition inspired, and success achieved" (as cited in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, p. 43).

Although this phenomenon has for the most part only attracted empirical attention in the last two decades, it has its roots in ancient philosophical and religious traditions (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) claim that posttraumatic growth is frequently reported by trauma survivors, and that these reports are more prevalent than reports of trauma-related disorders. The frequency of these reports supports the value in further investigating this phenomenon, and international research in posttraumatic growth is expanding. However, despite an accelerating number of studies in this field, it is not yet fully understood, and increased knowledge in this regard is needed (Cadell & Sullivan, 2006).

The idea that suffering can yield something of value has been embedded in many cultural discourses. This is illustrated, for example by the fact that "the Chinese symbol for crisis is both danger and opportunity" (Walsh, 2003, p. 69). Pals and McAdams (2004) suggest that while many cultures may acknowledge that benefit can be gained from overcoming hardships, the types of benefit and the types of hardships that may be experienced may be culturally-determined. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) maintain that while preliminary research indicates that posttraumatic growth does occur in multiple cultural contexts, it is probable that the manifestation of posttraumatic growth is mediated through sociocultural factors (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). In South Africa, posttraumatic growth has received minimal empirical attention. This study therefore attempts to make a preliminary contribution to the investigation of this phenomenon in the South African context.

1.2 Aims of the Study

This study aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the phenomenological experience of posttraumatic growth. This is hoped to enable a closer understanding of the perceptions and meanings that this phenomenon has for the individual that lives it. Rather than attempting to elicit generaliseable findings, this study intends to provide a deep understanding of how posttraumatic growth has manifested in the context of one individual's life. This study also intends to illuminate the participant's experience in comparison with existing research on posttraumatic growth. In addition, it is intended that

the results of this study shed light on the applicability of current posttraumatic growth theory.

1.3 Overview of the Chapters

A brief outline of the contents of the remaining chapters will now be presented.

Chapter 2 involves a review of the relevant literature pertaining to this study. This chapter begins with the historical development of posttraumatic growth so that this concept can be understood in context. Posttraumatic growth is then defined and clearly distinguished from other similar terms. The posttraumatic growth model as developed by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) is then fully explicated. This is followed by a review of alternative models and viewpoints, so that a comprehensive perspective of this concept can be attained. Specific posttraumatic growth studies are then reviewed, firstly in the South African context, and secondly in relation to bereavement specifically. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) maintain that posttraumatic growth following bereavement has been found to occur within the areas of self-perception, relationships, spirituality and also in the existential domain. This chapter ends with a review of the current gaps in the posttraumatic growth literature.

Chapter 3 documents the methodological issues pertaining to this idiographic case study. The usefulness of an idiographic approach has been mentioned with regards to investigating posttraumatic growth as this phenomenon is complex and not yet fully understood (Saakvitne, Tennen, & Affleck, 1998; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b). The chapter begins by briefly clarifying the aims of this study, which is essentially to explore the phenomenological experience of posttraumatic growth in the context of a traumatic bereavement. The methodology used in this study is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA has been noted to be particularly congruent with the idiographic case study approach (Smith, 2004). The theoretical stance of IPA is delineated. The process of recruiting and selecting the participant is described. The participant, who shall be referred to as the pseudonym "Sheila", witnessed her mother's

fatal car accident when she was an adolescent. She is currently enrolled as a university student. A study on Technicon Pretoria students indicated that more than two thirds of their sample had experienced trauma during the previous year, and that bereavement and witnessing death were of the most frequent types of trauma encountered (Hoffmann, 2002). Bereavement experiences of university students is not an area that has been well-investigated (Mathews & Servaty-Seib, 2007). Therefore, the present study attempted to begin to address these gaps. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, and themes were elicited using IPA procedure. The chapter ends by addressing concerns pertaining to reliability, validity and ethical considerations.

In Chapter 4 the elicited themes of the data analysis are presented. This chapter begins by demonstrating that Sheila's experience can be understood to be traumatic bereavement. Sheila experiences posttraumatic growth in several areas of her life. With regards to self-perception, Sheila perceives posttraumatic growth in increased self-awareness, a heightened sense of self-worth, an enhanced ability to cope with pain, greater independence, and increased creative expression. In the interpersonal domain, Sheila perceives that the traumatic bereavement has had both a positive as well as a negative impact. This complexity is addressed. In this domain, Sheila evinces posttraumatic growth in experiencing an increased connection to others who have suffered a loss, in desiring to share her experience of traumatic bereavement to help others, and in her passion for wilderness therapy. Sheila also portrays posttraumatic growth on an existential level. Coping with traumatic bereavement has enabled her to develop a more meaningful sense of purpose in life. This sense of purpose, in turn, has allowed her to find meaning in her loss. Sheila also experiences a deepening in her spiritual life as a result of the traumatic bereavement. This chapter ends with a description of Sheila's experience of posttraumatic growth as co-existing with pain.

Chapter 5 involves a discussion of the themes presented in Chapter 4. The meaning and implications of these themes are further explored, and these findings are discussed in conjunction with the theoretical and empirical posttraumatic growth literature. In particular, the usefulness of the posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006)

is evaluated, identifying the ways in which the findings of the present study correspond or deviate from this model. This chapter is supplemented by briefly considering the validity of Sheila's reported growth.

Chapter 6 concludes the manuscript. It begins with a summary of the main findings of the study as well as the implications of findings for the understanding of posttraumatic growth. This is followed by making several suggestions for further research in this area. This chapter ends with a discussion of the limitations and contributions of this study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins by presenting an overview of the historical development of posttraumatic growth so as to place it in context. Thereafter, the concept of posttraumatic growth will be fully explicated in terms of proposed definitions, theoretical models and empirical research. Subsequently, posttraumatic growth in the context of bereavement will be reviewed. Lastly, this chapter will highlight the predominant gaps in current posttraumatic growth research.

2.1 Historical Context

Traditionally, psychology has tended to concentrate on pathology and weakness, and it has only been in the past two decades that the area of strengths and growth following adversity has received interest (Tedeschi, Park, & Calhoun, 1998). However, this concept can be traced back to ancient philosophies and religious traditions. For example, Christianity, Islam and Buddhism acknowledge that suffering can provide opportunities for growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

Existential philosophy is probably the first field in psychology to incorporate the idea that growth and meaning may follow from suffering (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). It is significant that existential psychology emerged in response to the trauma of World War II (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). A powerful example of this involves holocaust-survivor Viktor Frankl (1959). Frankl developed a mode of therapy known as "logotherapy", which entails helping clients find value and purpose in the face of adversity (Kaminer, 2006). Caplan, Dohwrenwend, Maslow and Yalom (as cited in Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) are other key contributors that have acknowledged that the struggle with hardship could yield growth.

More recently, the burgeoning field of positive psychology has drawn attention to well-being and potential for growth rather than an exclusive focus on pathology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology maintains an empowering and holistic view of people, emphasising that:

> psychology is not just the study of pathology, weakness, and damage; it is also the study of strength and virtue. Treatment is not just fixing what is broken; it is nurturing what is best. Psychology is not just a branch of medicine concerned with illness or health; it is much larger. It is about work, education, insight, love, growth, and play. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 7)

Within the field of positive psychology, there has been growing recognition that struggling with traumatic experiences can give rise to positive changes, and that reports of positive change occur surprisingly often (Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2004). Although studies have addressed coping with trauma, reports of positive changes as a result of the struggle with trauma have generally only been addressed in the past two decades (Tedeschi et al., 1998). Despite this general trend, however, several preliminary studies (Hamera & Shontz, 1978; Houston, Bloom, Burish, & Cummings, 1978; Wilson & Spencer, 1990, as cited in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) have been conducted that reported positive change following trauma. Through conducting a review of studies that reported positive changes following trauma, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) consolidated these findings and categorised them as pertaining to "changes in self-perception, interpersonal relationships, and philosophy of life" (p. 30). While models of coping processes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984, as cited in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) and of meaning-making (Baumeister, 1991, as cited in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) were in existence, Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) contributed to the extant literature by developing a model that documented the process of growth following traumatic experiences.

In contrast to models that conceptualise perceptions of positive change as a coping strategy (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986, as cited in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995), the posttraumatic growth model considers perceptions of growth to constitute an outcome of the struggle with trauma. The posttraumatic growth model built on the *conceptual model of positive outcomes of life crises and transitions* (Schaefer & Moos, 1992, as cited in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). The *conceptual model of positive outcomes of life crises and transitions* is purported to refer to the characteristics of the individual as well as of the environment, the type of crisis and coping appraisals that the trauma survivor employed. Aspects of this model were incorporated into the posttraumatic

growth model. Updated versions of the posttraumatic growth model have been subsequently published (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

In 1996, Tedeschi and Calhoun developed the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). This has enabled the phenomenon to be quantitatively assessed. The PTGI was based on a review of the available literature on reactions to life crises as well as from interviews with individuals who had experienced extreme stressors. Factor analysis yielded 21 items pertaining to five factors that form the basis of posttraumatic growth theory (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004).

Interest in this phenomenon has burgeoned, and posttraumatic growth studies have focused on a broad spectrum of traumatic experience. Recent examples of these studies include: cancer (Stanton, Bower, & Low, 2006); terrorism (Hobfoll et al., 2007); war (Rosner & Poswell, 2006); HIV/ AIDS (Milam, 2006), the holocaust (Lev-Wiesel & Amir, 2006), severe motor accidents (Rabe, Zöllner, & Maercker, 2006), emergency ambulance work (Shakespeare-Finch, Gow, & Smith, 2005), heart disease (Sheikh, 2004), assault (Grubaugh & Resick, 2007), spinal cord injury (Franklin, 2007), bombings (Val & Linley, 2006) and bereavement (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001).

2.2 Defining Posttraumatic Growth

The concept of benefiting from adversity has been investigated under a host of similar terms. These include concepts such as: *positive psychological changes* (Yalom & Lieberman, 1991); *benefit-finding* (Affleck & Tennen, 1996); *transformational coping* (Aldwin, 1994); *perceived benefits* (McMillen & Fisher, 1998); *thriving* (O'Leary, Alday, & Ickovics, 1998); *stress-related growth* (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996); *adversarial growth* (Linley & Joseph, 2004) and *posttraumatic growth* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

Posttraumatic growth can be defined as "the subjective experience of positive psychological change reported by an individual as a result of the struggle with trauma"

(Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b, p. 628). This study focuses on the term *posttraumatic growth* as opposed to the others that have been mentioned above. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) suggest several reasons that support this choice, such as the following: Firstly, the term "posttraumatic growth" makes it clear that the positive change is directly linked to the struggle with hardship. Secondly, this term makes it explicit that this hardship was of traumatic severity. Thirdly, the word *growth* encapsulates the idea that people's lives have been in some way(s) positively changed beyond their pre-trauma functioning. This therefore overlaps with concepts such as resilience, hardiness and coping, yet it is different in that it implies exceeded functioning.

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) define trauma as synonymous with terms such as *crisis* and *major stressor* (p. 3), emphasising that they are experiences that pose a significant threat to the individual's previously held understandings about the self in the world. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) have clearly expressed that experiences of major loss such as the death of a loved one are included in this definition. Therefore, investigating posttraumatic growth in the context of bereavement is appropriate. The term "trauma" will be used for simplicity sake while discussing general posttraumatic growth theory. However, the reader is asked to bear in mind that experiences of bereavement are equally applicable. The area of bereavement will be specifically addressed later in this chapter. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) admit that their definition of trauma is broader than other definitions. For example, the text revised fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) defines a traumatic event as involving a direct experience of threat to the physical being of the self or another, and when the reaction to this event was one of "intense fear, helplessness, or horror" (American Psychiatric Association, 2003, p. 467).

2.3 The Posttraumatic Growth Model

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) have stressed several important points which need to be mentioned before the posttraumatic growth model can be explicated: Firstly, posttraumatic growth is not experienced by all trauma survivors, nor should there be expectations or pressure on trauma survivors for this to be. Secondly, paying attention to the growth that many trauma survivors report does not dismiss or invalidate the real suffering and painful

consequences that are endured. Rather, posttraumatic growth is understood to exist in the context of – and along side – distress. Thirdly, especially when working with trauma survivors, it is important to avoid a simplistic, prescriptive or insensitive view of posttraumatic growth.

A description of the posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) will be presented in this section. This will include a brief delineation of the variables as well as the stages that the posttraumatic growth model proposes. The order of each sub-section follows that of the posttraumatic growth model (See Appendix A). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) acknowledge that knowledge of posttraumatic growth is in its preliminary stages, and that future developments may bring about modifications to the current model. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) have used the metaphor of a community damaged by an earthquake to depict the process of posttraumatic growth. Their metaphor will now be briefly described in order to provide an introductory overview to this section: Traumatic events are akin to the disastrous experience that produces immense distress. Existing cognitive schemas, compared to pre-earthquake buildings and structures, are shaken and damaged, causing confusion and disarray. In the aftermath of the earthquake, individuals are preoccupied with survival, and with trying to make sense of what has happened. A while later, however, the tasks of rebuilding become salient. This provides an opportunity to reflect on what has been learnt through this experience as well as what was useful in the previous structures. Furthermore, individuals can contemplate what improvements to the last structure can be made that are stronger and better than before, being more able to withstand future traumas. These strengthened, more adaptive structures metaphorically represent posttraumatic growth.

2.3.1 *Person Pretrauma*

It has been suggested that it is not only the content of the trauma but also the personal resources and characteristics of the survivor that determine posttraumatic growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) emphasise that the personality traits of *extraversion*, *openness to experience* and – to a lesser extent – *optimism* are most strongly implicated in the

development of posttraumatic growth. In their review, Linley and Joseph (2004) identified *extraversion*, *openness to experience*, *agreeableness*, *conscientiousness*, *self-efficacy*, *hardiness*, *higher self-esteem* and *optimism* as personality traits that are associated with growth following trauma. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) have suggested that posttraumatic growth is associated with moderate levels of traumatic distress, and that a curvilinear relationship exists. They hypothesise that this may be because individuals that have too few coping resources may be too challenged by the trauma to engage in growth-oriented processing. Furthermore, they propose that individuals who are highly resilient may not be sufficiently challenged by the trauma. Taking trauma in their stride, there may not be significant change to represent posttraumatic growth.

2.3.2 *Seismic Event*

The characteristics of the trauma play an important role within the development of posttraumatic growth, however, what is important is how the traumatic event is experienced by the individual. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) have defined trauma as a severe stressor that undermines the individual's coping resources and their assumptive world. Janoff-Bulman (1992, 2006) developed the concept of an *assumptive world* and describes this as an individual's cognitive framework or fundamental schemas that help to impose order and predictability and a sense of security onto the world in which we live. These beliefs are explained as being self-protective, over-valued ideas rather than realistic and conscious beliefs. Furthermore, these cognitions are said to allow us to approach the world with confidence, anticipating good things to befall us rather than fully comprehending our vulnerability. For example, while individuals may be well aware of national statistics, trauma survivors frequently report that they never believed that these experiences could happen to them. The assumptive world is said to consist of three key assumptions: that of the self as being *worthy*, and the world as being a *meaningful* and *benevolent* place (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2006).

2.3.2.1 *Self as Worthy*

Janoff-Bulman (1992) claims that on an abstract and unconscious level individuals perceive themselves to be *worthy*. This refers to a view of the self as being decent, competent and deserving. Again, this does not entail specific or conscious ideas about the self, but rather, these assumptions are general and emotionally-driven. In perceiving the self in this way, individuals defend against acknowledging how vulnerable they are and are able to attain a sense of security (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

2.3.2.2 *World as Meaningful*

Janoff-Bulman (1992, 2006) claims that people tend to assume that the world is an ordered and predictable place that makes sense. This includes an implicit belief that what happens to an individual is dependent on the type of person that they are or the behaviours that they engage in. Janoff-Bulman (1992, 2006) explains that the idea that tragedies randomly befall individuals is a highly threatening one, as it involves acknowledging that the bad things that happen to others may happen to us. Therefore, the assumption of a meaningful world defends against anxiety. For example, emphasising the irresponsible nature of someone whose house has burnt down helps to provide a sense of comfort that these events can be effectively guarded against.

2.3.2.3 *World as Benevolent*

Assumptions that the world is benevolent include an expectation that people will treat us fairly, respectfully and compassionately. It also involves anticipating that in general, good things will come our way (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

2.3.3 *Trauma and the Assumptive World*

Janoff-Bulman (2006) proposes that while these beliefs tend to be robust and change-resistant, the severity of traumatic experiences serve to disrupt aspects of the assumptive world. Wholly unprepared for these experiences, the world may no longer be experienced as familiar, safe or understandable. The individual in crisis may no longer perceive that

they are able to cope in the world. Therefore, the aftermath of trauma is associated with intense anxiety and insecurity. Janoff-Bulman (2006) maintains that while both children and adults construct these schemas, they tend to be less rigid in children. Children may be more susceptible than adults to being influenced by their environment.

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) claim that the disruption to the assumptive world plays an important role in posttraumatic growth. They maintain that this is because experiences that do not pose a substantial threat to the assumptive world are easily assimilated, and the individual is unlikely to evince much change. On the other hand, challenges to the assumptive world are likely to initiate processing that can lead to growth. Several studies have found that increased growth is associated with heightened crisis-related distress (Linley & Joseph, 2004; Stanton et al., 2006; Weiss, 2004; Wild & Paivio, 2003, as cited in Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). These studies support the claim that a sufficient challenge to the assumptive world is required for meaningful change to occur.

The role of the disrupted assumptive world in understandings of trauma has not been wholly supported. Evans and Swartz (2000) raise the suggestion that in communities where trauma is widespread and on-going, trauma may be expected and even normative. In response to this point, Janoff-Bulman (2004) argues that what we believe on a rational level may differ from what we accept on a deeper, emotional level. *Dual-process models* (Chaiken & Trope, 1999, as cited in Janoff-Bulman, 2004) similarly differentiate between explicit and implicit beliefs.

Park (2004) asserts that further empirical investigation is needed in order to clarify the role of the assumptive world with regards to trauma-related growth. Davis, Wohl, and Verberg (2007) conducted a study on potential profiles of growth following trauma. In this study, several participants demonstrated growth in a way that fitted within the posttraumatic growth model. However, there was also a group of individuals who demonstrated a small degree of growth despite only a slight disruption to their assumptive world. Davis et al. (2007) suggest that while disruptions to the assumptive world can yield high levels of

positive change, a certain amount of growth is possible even without this disruption. Furthermore, they propose that alternative pathways to growth may need further investigation. Others have elucidated that growth can occur for less extreme negative circumstances, positive experiences, and normative developmental experiences (Aldwin & Levenson, 2004).

2.3.4 *Challenges Posed by the Trauma*

The posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) proposes that the experience of trauma confronts the individual with several challenges. These will now be described. Firstly, in the face of immense emotional upheaval, the individual is faced with the difficult task of managing his or her levels of emotional distress. Attaining a level of initial coping is necessary before growth-oriented processing can take place (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Secondly, trauma poses a substantial challenge to the individual's *beliefs and goals* as previously held understandings of the individual's place in the world no longer fit. Thirdly, trauma directly threatens the individual's sense of personal *narrative*. For example, traumatic bereavement threatens the self-narrative as it represents the loss of an important person who affirmed the bereft individual's existence and who was an integral part of his or her life plans and purposes (Neimeyer, Prigerson, & Davies, 2002).

2.3.5 *Initial Rumination*

The posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) proposes that the disruptive nature of trauma causes the individual to engage in cognitive rumination, and that this is a necessary part of posttraumatic growth. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) acknowledge that certain types of ruminating have been associated with negative consequences such as depression. To this end, they propose that the type of rumination they refer to in the model is synonymous with the terms *cognitive engagement* or *cognitive processing* which refer to the "process of re-examining the beliefs that characterise one's assumptive world in light of an unexpected trauma" (Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2007, p. 398). These terms will be used interchangeably for the purposes of this study.

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) explain that in the aftermath of trauma, rumination is considered to occur spontaneously, outside of the individual's deliberate control. Such cognitive processing is said to be orientated towards trying to cope with distress and also to attempt to comprehend the reality of what has occurred. The content of the ruminations are presumed to play an important role in the development of posttraumatic growth. Posttraumatic growth has been found to be more likely to develop if cognitions are constructive (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b) and solution-focused rather than passive brooding (Nolen-Hoeksema & Davis, 2004). Several studies have been conducted that support the suggestion that such cognitive processing is associated with growth (Bower, Kemeny, Taylor, & Fahey, 1998; Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cooper, 2000; Ullrich & Lutgendorf, 2002, as cited in Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

2.3.6 Self-disclosure: Writing and Talking

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) have identified self-disclosure as occupying an important role in the development of posttraumatic growth. They propose that self-disclosure, whether verbally or in written form, maintains and facilitates cognitive processing about trauma-related issues. Furthermore, they maintain that self-disclosures are mediated by socio-cultural factors, such as to what extent people in the individual's lives encourage self-disclosing.

2.3.7 Sociocultural Factors

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) distinguish between *distal* (broader) sociocultural factors such as at the national level, and *proximate* (narrower) ones such as the individual's personal support system. Sociocultural factors are considered to play an important role in mediating the development of posttraumatic growth. Distal factors such as cultural discourses inform how individuals think and talk about trauma and growth. Posttraumatic growth is an area of study that has developed in America, and therefore most research has been conducted on an American population. While preliminary research indicates that posttraumatic growth does occur in multiple cultural contexts, sociocultural factors need to be taken into account (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004).

Individuals in the trauma survivor's reference group may respond to the trauma survivor in varyingly supportive ways. Empathic others may encourage the trauma-survivor's disclosures and may offer helpful perspectives that can aid the reconstruction of more adaptive schemas (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Schaefer and Moos (1998) elaborate on the importance of the trauma survivor's social context, pointing out that support can be attained not only from friends and relatives, but also from other community resources such as counsellors and support groups. These factors impact on the likelihood of growth developing, and unhelpful social responses are assumed to be associated with less growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Unhelpful social responses, for example criticizing the survivor for dwelling on the past, makes it difficult for the survivor to share his or her thoughts and feelings about the trauma in a supportive context. Studies have found that satisfaction with one's perceived social support is associated with higher levels of posttraumatic growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

2.3.8 *Goal Disengagement and More Manageable Rumination and Distress*

The posttraumatic growth model proposes that after some time has passed, the trauma survivor becomes more able to manage his or her emotional distress. Furthermore, it is assumed that the individual becomes increasingly able to comprehend and accept the reality of what has happened (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) add that after some time has passed, pretrauma ambitions and expectations that no longer fit are surrendered. By way of example they describe a bereaved individual who needs to acknowledge that the anticipation of a shared future is no longer possible. According to the posttraumatic growth model, it is assumed that sufficient management of distress and disengagement from nullified beliefs and goals are necessary for the development of posttraumatic growth.

2.3.9 *Deliberate Rumination, Schema Modification and Narrative Development*

The next stage of the posttraumatic growth model involves a shift towards more constructive meaning making. Cognitive engagement/ rumination tends to be more purposeful rather than intrusive and automatic (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Davis, Nolen-

Hoeksema, and Larson (1998) differentiate between meaning as *sense making* and meaning as *benefit-finding*. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) maintain that at this stage, the trauma survivor is less preoccupied with attempting to comprehend what has changed, and may be able to focus on aspects of significance or value within the experience. They add that this shift in cognitive processing involves schema reconstruction that enables the traumatic experience to be accommodated. The trauma survivor is faced with the challenge of constructing a view of the self in the world that acknowledges that while negative events are inevitable, the world is generally meaningful and manageable (Janoff-Bulman, 2006). In this way, schema modifications that accommodate the trauma tend to manifest as an acceptance of life's paradoxes. For example, trauma survivors may recognise their vulnerability more clearly while simultaneously having a new appreciation of their strengths (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

This stage in the model also refers to rebuilding the individual's personal narrative that has been disrupted by trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). As the individual becomes able to accommodate the traumatic experience, they are able to integrate it within their life narrative. This is often perceived as a watershed or turning-point in the individual's life (Kaminer, 2006). The knowledge and skills that were utilised in the struggle with trauma are no longer latent but are brought to the fore, and the narrative may become one of survival and triumph (Kaminer, 2006).

2.3.10 Posttraumatic growth

The model proposes that posttraumatic growth emerges from the process of schema reconstruction (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Tedeschi and Calhoun (1995) have stated that "growth *is* change in schemas" (p. 81). Having accommodated the experience, trauma survivors may have a deeper awareness of life's priorities and more adaptive and meaningful ways of being in the world that exceed pretrauma levels of functioning. Modified beliefs, novel ambitions and new meanings are involved in posttraumatic growth attainment (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2001; Neimeyer et al., 2002).

Posttraumatic growth can be roughly categorised as pertaining to positive changes that occur within self-perception, within the interpersonal arena, and growth on a broader philosophical level (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). More specifically, factor analysis has identified five posttraumatic growth domains. These are namely: *personal strength, new possibilities, relating to others, appreciation of life* and *spiritual change* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). These five areas can be grouped according to the three general categories as follows: changes to self-perception involve the domains of *personal strength* and *new possibilities*; *relating to others* constitutes growth in the interpersonal arena, and *appreciation of life* and *spiritual change* represents growth in the broader philosophical level of posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Park and Lechner (2006) point out that while these domains are useful, they are not exhaustive, and that there is not yet consensus on these dimensions. These domains will now be described.

2.3.10.1 Posttraumatic Growth in Self-perception

While traumatic experiences tend to confront the individual with their human vulnerability, they may also provide an opportunity to mobilise and develop previously dormant skills and resources (Janoff-Bulman, 2006). As a result, trauma survivors often emerge from the struggle with a newfound sense of their strengths. These strengths often surpass preconceived capabilities (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). The sense of having endured the unendurable often leads to an increased sense of self-efficacy and self-reliance which may translate into increased self-care, assertiveness and confidence in dealing with future obstacles (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

The domain of *new possibilities* refers to new interests, activities or occupations that emerge as a result of the struggle with trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). These novel engagements may centre on altruistic pursuits, as survivors may wish to share their experiences with those who are going through similar difficulties (Tedeschi et al., 1998) Herman (1997) proposes that the trauma survivor's altruism facilitates personal healing and empowerment through social action.

2.3.10.2 *Interpersonal Posttraumatic Growth*

The struggle with trauma may have positive effects in the area of *relating to others*. Experiencing the universal human condition of suffering may lead to a heightened sense of connectedness to the human race, and survivors have reported having increased compassion and empathy for fellow sufferers (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). This may involve being more attuned to the needs and feelings of others, as well as a greater willingness to reach out when support is needed (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). Survivors have reported being able to distinguish more clearly between genuine and superficial relationships, with increased value being placed on intimacy and authenticity in relationships (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). More effort and attention is directed towards nurturing meaningful relationships. Communication may be improved, such as through increased honesty and making more personal disclosures (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

2.3.10.3 *Posttraumatic Growth in the Philosophical Domain*

Posttraumatic growth is often evidenced in an increased *appreciation of life*, which involves re-evaluating priorities and adjusting the use of one's time and effort accordingly. Cherishing previously taken for granted friends and family and dedicating less attention to material acquisition is often reported (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Trauma survivors, having been faced with the finitude of life, may now take pleasure in enjoying small simple daily joys (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

Although certainly not always, grappling with difficult trauma-related issues may lead to meaningful *spiritual change* (Pargament, Desai, & McConnell, 2006). Spirituality can be defined as "a greater sense of somehow being connected to something transcendent" (Tedeschi et al., 1998, p. 14). Spiritual growth may occur as a result of drawing on spiritual resources in order to cope, or developing spiritual beliefs through trying to make sense of trauma. This can provide a source of comfort and support as well as a framework that renders the experience more understandable, meaningful and manageable (Pargament et al., 2006).

2.3.11 *Distress*

Proponents of posttraumatic growth conceptualise distress as enduring throughout the process of posttraumatic growth development. Distress is assumed to be at its most acute in the period shortly after the traumatic event, yet it often remains to some extent once posttraumatic growth has been attained (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Initial coping is centred upon managing distress levels, and it is assumed that this is necessary in order to prepare for growth-orientated processing. However, a certain amount of distress is important as it serves to mobilise cognitive engagement. In this way, persisting distress may influence the continuing development and existence of posttraumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

2.3.12 *Narrative and Wisdom*

Posttraumatic growth is considered to have a mutual impact on narrative and wisdom (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Calhoun and Tedeschi (1998) define wisdom as the ability to comprehend life's paradoxes both intellectually and emotionally. They provide an example that in coping with trauma, "one must recognize the need to receive help, but that healing ultimately occurs within" (p. 233). Posttraumatic growth has a direct and reciprocal influence on the survivor's life narrative, as survivors develop new ways of thinking about their lives (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In particular, the traumatic experience and the subsequent growth is established as a story of survival (Kaminer, 2006).

The facets of the posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) have been described. This has included the characteristics of the trauma survivor, the nature of the traumatic event as well as the challenges that trauma poses to the individual. Cognitive processes have been delineated, including both initial rumination as well as secondary, growth-orientated processing. The mediating variables of self-disclosure and sociocultural factors have been described. The development of posttraumatic growth as schema change that manifests in various domains has been elucidated. The related constructs of distress, narrative and wisdom have also been addressed.

2.4 Overview of Alternative Models

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) have laid a useful and illuminating foundation for understanding the processes involved in posttraumatic growth. However, others have proposed alternative theoretical understandings of growth following trauma. An overview of these models follows.

One unresolved debate within posttraumatic growth literature concerns whether posttraumatic growth should best be considered as an *outcome* of having struggled with trauma, or as a *process* employed in attempting to cope. O'Leary et al. (1998) conducted a review of models conceptualising change as an outcome as well as models that understand change to be a process. It was found that there seems to be general agreement that there is an immediate change in terms of an early response to trauma, but that resolving the trauma in a way that constitutes enduring psychological change is likely to be a process that is extended over time. Zoellner and Maercker (2006b) provide a more updated review of models that pertain to positive change after trauma. In the same way, they categorised models that consider posttraumatic growth to be an outcome of the struggle to cope with trauma on the one hand, and on the other, models that conceptualise posttraumatic growth as a coping strategy or process used in coping with trauma. These will now be described before addressing a view of posttraumatic growth as both outcome and coping strategy.

With regards to the models that conceptualise posttraumatic growth as an outcome of coping, Zoellner and Maercker (2006b) acknowledge the posttraumatic growth model as developed by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004). They also refer to *the conceptual model of positive outcomes of life crises and transitions* (Schaefer & Moos, 1992, as cited in Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Both of these models are described as referring to psychosocial characteristics of the individual prior to the traumatic experience as well as attributes of the traumatic experience. Furthermore, these models both consider reports of growth to be veridical outcomes of struggling with trauma rather than as defensive coping strategies. Zoellner and Maercker (2006b) warn that although growth as outcome models are helpful, posttraumatic growth as a fully "positive and adaptive phenomenon...has not yet been demonstrated convincingly" (p. 649).

In contrast to the above models, Zoellner and Maercker (2006b) review four models that conceptualise reports of growth following trauma as a coping process or coping strategy rather than as an outcome of coping. This review will now be described. Firstly, Davis et al. (as cited in Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b) have described posttraumatic growth as a particular *construal of meaning*. According to this perspective, reports of posttraumatic growth are an attempt to make meaning following trauma by searching for gains within the experience. Secondly, Park and Folkman (as cited in Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b) distinguish between *global meaning* (deeply entrenched beliefs about the world) and *situational meaning* (the interplay between global meaning and the individual's psychosocial context). Traumatic experiences are assumed to challenge global meaning which causes the individual to engage in meaning-making activity. Reports of posttraumatic growth would therefore be understood to be attempts at realigning the two types of meaning. For example, perceiving gains within the traumatic experience reduces its incongruence with the individual's global meaning. On the other hand, constructing new spiritual beliefs would involve accommodating the traumatic experience by altering global meaning. Thirdly, Filipp (as cited in Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b) conceptualises posttraumatic growth as an *interpretative process*. According to this view, perceiving growth following trauma involves constructing an interpretative account of the experience. Fourthly, Taylor (as cited in Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b) has delineated the *cognitive adaptation theory*. This theory conceptualises posttraumatic growth as a *positive illusion*. In other words, trauma survivors tend to falsely perceive posttraumatic growth as a strategy that enables them to cope with the distressing experience. This is similar to the assertion made by McFarland and Alvaro (2000) that individuals tend to underestimate their pre-trauma functioning so as to perceive that they have subsequently grown. Perceiving positive changes following trauma would therefore constitute a coping strategy.

Despite the debate on posttraumatic growth as an outcome versus a coping strategy, many theorists conceptualise posttraumatic growth as both outcome and coping process (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Maercker & Zoellner, 2004, as cited in Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b). Linley (2003) clarifies how it is that posttraumatic growth

can be understood as both an outcome as well as process by comparing it to the concept of wisdom. While wisdom is an end-product of grappling with difficult life experiences, it is a dynamic rather than static entity. Such is it with posttraumatic growth.

Zoellner and Maercker (2006b) have put forward a two-part model of posttraumatic growth termed the "Janus-Face" (p. 639) model of posttraumatic growth. The term *Janus-Face* depicts a Roman God who was usually portrayed as having two faces that looked in opposing directions. This image embodies their theory of posttraumatic growth as having both a "*functional*, self-transcending or constructive side" as well as "an *illusory*, self-deceptive, or dysfunctional side" (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b, p. 640). This theory postulates that the functional side is positively related to adjustment after trauma, unlike the illusory side, which plays a defensive role.

McMillen (2004) proposes that rather than a uniform growth model, it may be more useful to devise models pertaining to specific posttraumatic growth domains. This would make it possible to account for various pathways to growth that may exist. In this regard, Janoff-Bulman (2004) has proposed a classification of three different pathways to posttraumatic growth. These are namely: *strength through suffering*; *psychological preparedness* and *existential reevaluation*.

Janoff-Bulman (2004) describes *strength through suffering* as comprising of the *personal strength* and *new possibilities* domains of posttraumatic growth. This reflects the idea that extreme challenges mobilise us to make use of and develop our resources and skills. According to this hypothesis, challenges can render us psychologically fit in the same way that putting our bodies through grueling exercise regimes strengthens our muscles. This is said to often lead to increased levels of perceived self-sufficiency; stamina and self-esteem. Janoff-Bulman (2004) further suggests that this type of growth occurs as a natural result of enduring the challenges of trauma, and is not related to the rebuilding of a disrupted assumptive world.

The second pathway to posttraumatic growth that Janoff-Bulman (2004) proposes is termed *psychological preparedness*. This refers to the possibility that having overcome trauma, the survivor has developed skills and resources that act as a buffer against the damaging impact of further hardships that may come the survivor's way. This is comparable to the way that exposure to a disease can cause antibodies to be produced that foster future immunity. Unlike the previous category, this is said to entail a degree of schematic restructuring so that the trauma can be accommodated. The new-found strengths developed and realised through grappling with the trauma are combined with a modified assumptive world that acknowledges that the potential for hardships to occur in the future exists (Janoff-Bulman, 2004).

Psychological preparedness resonates with the concept of *reconfiguration* (Lepore & Revenson, 2006). Although posttraumatic growth and resilience are largely separate constructs, it has been suggested that reconfiguration is a specific type of resilience that reflects posttraumatic growth. Reconfiguration involves being changed by the struggle with trauma in such a way that the individual emerges able to adapt to future hardships more effectively. *Reconfiguration* is compared to a tree that bends in the face of a storm but that does not re-right itself into its original position. Instead, it changes shape to accommodate the storm in such a way that makes it more likely to withstand future storms (Lepore & Revenson, 2006).

The third pathway to posttraumatic growth that Janoff-Bulman (2004) proposes is *existential reevaluation*. This is said to subsume three of the posttraumatic growth domains that Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996) have identified, namely: *appreciation of life, relating to others* and *spiritual change*. These are similar in that they involve a shared "new-found appreciation of one's existence in the world" (Janoff-Bulman, 2004, p. 32). Trauma survivors come to value life more after having been confronted with its impermanence. Appreciating life more enables survivors to overcome the senselessness of the trauma, and to reconstruct a perception that the world is meaningful. This pathway to growth is said not to occur as a direct result of having endured trauma, but rather as a result of reconstructing the assumptive world in a way that affirms life's meaningfulness.

Alternatives to the posttraumatic growth model as proposed by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) have been reviewed. This has involved a description of the debate between posttraumatic growth as a coping outcome versus posttraumatic growth as a coping strategy. Specific models on either side of this debate have been presented, as well as models that conceptualise posttraumatic growth as both an outcome of coping as well as a coping strategy. Apart from models divided along the coping outcome/ coping strategy debate, Janoff-Bulman (2004) has proposed three alternative models to posttraumatic growth. These models, *strength through suffering*, *psychological preparedness* and *existential reevaluation* are distinguished from each other according to the degree of schema change involved (Janoff-Bulman, 2004).

2.5 Overview of Relevant Empirical Studies

This chapter now turns to a focused review of relevant studies. Firstly, posttraumatic growth as an area of empirical investigation in South Africa will be briefly addressed. Secondly, a review of studies that have investigated posttraumatic growth in the context of bereavement will be presented. This part will first require clarification of several bereavement-related terms before attending to study findings.

2.5.1 *South African Studies on Posttraumatic Growth*

The phenomenon of posttraumatic growth remains largely unexplored in the extant South African literature. An overview of efforts to attain South African posttraumatic growth studies will now be delineated. This will be followed by a description of the items that were identified in the search, which took place on 16 January 2008. The researcher searched for the terms: "posttraumatic growth", "post-traumatic growth" and "post traumatic growth" in both the Sabinet database as well as the South African Journal of Psychology. Thereafter, the researcher searched international journals for studies that included one of the following phrases: "posttraumatic growth", "post-traumatic growth" or "post traumatic growth" together with the phrase "South Africa". The following databases were used to search for these studies: EBSCO*host* (which included Academic Premier,

PsycINFO and PsycARTICLES); Science Direct; Pubmed; Highwire Press; JSTOR; Scopus and ISI Web of Science.

The above-mentioned search yielded seven results, of varying relevance to the present study. These will now be described in order of least to most relevant. An American study on posttraumatic growth was identified. This study was only identified because it referred to one South African study on countertransference (Moosa, 1992), and therefore this study was not considered relevant to the present study. A review of an American book on posttraumatic growth was highlighted in the search (Hoyle, 2000). This review only briefly mentions South Africa in terms of the TRC having been an example of how the outcome of having struggled with trauma can positively impact on a community. It therefore does not constitute South African research on posttraumatic growth. A guest editorial in a South African journal was identified (Gagiano & Pistorius, 1998), however the phrase "posttraumatic growth" was not mentioned. An Afrikaans theology thesis (Cilliers, 2004) on pastoral therapy in the context of occult involvement was also identified. The abstract of this study made mention of facilitating spiritual growth as aiding in the recovery from occult involvement. The phrase "posttraumatic growth" was not mentioned in this abstract. A thesis by Hartman (1994) on ego-state therapy following sexual abuse also came up in the search. This study is specifically concerned with ego-state therapy, and does not deal with the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth. Only two South African studies were found that were specifically concerned with posttraumatic growth. These will now be described.

The first involves a study conducted by Peltzer (2000). Unfortunately, the researcher was unable to access the full article through interlibrary loan as it appears that the specific journal volume was not stored in South Africa at this time. This study investigated the trauma symptoms of survivors of violent crime in urban settings. Participants consisted of over one hundred South Africans who had personally experienced violent crime within eight years prior to interviewing. This study examined the relationship between four trauma symptom scales in addition to the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). It was found that the trauma symptom scales were positively correlated to one another.

Secondly, a study by Polatinsky and Esprey (2000) was identified. This study investigated the perception of benefits in bereaved parents. 67 bereaved parents participated. These individuals had experienced the death of a child six months to eight years prior to participation. Participants completed a demographic questionnaire as well as the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI). The cause of death included suicide, homicide, motor accident and illness. This study found that bereaved parents were able to perceive benefits in their experience of coping with loss. Gender differences in the perception of benefits were not found to be significant. Individuals whose child had died through illness tended to score higher on the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) than parents who had been bereaved through other causes. This finding suggests that it may be more difficult to perceive benefits from loss that occurs unexpectedly and suddenly. This study found that bereaved parents who were married tended to perceive more benefits than their unmarried counterparts. Findings also indicated a slight trend for perceived benefits to be reported after a longer duration of time has passed subsequent to the death. However, this finding was not statistically significant. Another finding was that younger bereaved parents tended to perceive more benefits than older bereaved parents, although this too was only a slight discrepancy.

2.5.2 *Posttraumatic Growth in the Context of Bereavement*

Before reviewing the literature of posttraumatic growth in the context of bereavement, it is necessary to attain conceptual clarity of bereavement-related terms.

2.5.2.1 *Defining Terms*

Zhang, El-Jawahri, and Prigerson (2006) define the term "bereavement" as "the experience of losing to death a person to whom one is attached" (p. 1188) and the term "grief" as "the emotional distress associated with that loss" (p. 1188). "Mourning" can be understood as the "external expression or public expression of that loss" (Kirwin & Hamrin, 2005, p. 67).

There is growing acknowledgement in the literature that acknowledges the overlapping relationship between trauma and bereavement (Green, 2000; Rubin, Malkinson, & Witztum, 2003; Walsh, 2007). Several related terms reflect this. The term "traumatic

bereavement" refers to bereavement that occurs through a traumatic manner of death, i.e. through "sudden, violent or accidental means" (Neria & Litz, 2003, p. 78). In the same way, Black and Tuffnell (2006) propose that the term "traumatic bereavement" is justified "where the loss is sudden, unexpected and horrific, as in homicide, suicide and fatal accidents" (p. 465).

Davis et al. (2007) claims that although all bereavement experiences have the potential to undermine the individual's assumptive world, deaths that are more sudden, unexpected and untimely are more likely to pose a threat to the assumptive world and to necessitate a process of meaning reconstruction. Green (2000) defines "traumatic loss" as the death of a loved one that is "sudden, violent or unexpected" (p. 2). This appears to suggest that this term is interchangeable with the term traumatic bereavement. However, "traumatic loss" has elsewhere been defined in terms of loss of the assumptive world that existed prior to the trauma (Spira, 2002, p. 112). Separation from a loved one through a traumatic death provides a context which may lead to disorders such as posttraumatic stress disorder or complicated grief disorder (Zhang et al., 2006, p. 1192). Complicated grief disorder has alternatively been termed "traumatic grief" as well as "pathologic grief, abnormal grief, atypical grief, and pathologic mourning" (Zhang et al., 2006, p. 1191). The proposed fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V) defines complicated grief disorder as pronounced and chronic yearning for the person who has died. It involves disruptive symptoms such as the following: anxiety; the inability to accepting the death and invest in the present and future; interpersonal difficulties; marked anger and a sense of life as being pointless (as cited in Zhang et. al., 2006).

2.5.2.2 *Overview of Studies on Posttraumatic Growth in the Context of Bereavement*

Traditional bereavement research has tended to conceptualise resolution of grief as a return to pre-loss equilibrium. In contrast to this, contemporary bereavement research reflects a shift away from this view towards acknowledging that the intense and intimate experience of bereavement can leave one transformed (Hogan & Schmidt, 2002; Znoj, 2006). Growth potential following the struggle with bereavement has generally been neglected by traditional research, which has tended to focus on the pain and negative effects of grief

(Frantz, Farrell, & Trolley et al., 2001). It is not that bereavement is a positive, preferred or beneficial experience, but rather that the painful struggle with loss may ultimately result in psychological growth. In their study including over three hundred bereaved adults, Frantz, Trolley and Farrell (1998) found that 84% of participants reported experiencing positive effects from their struggle with bereavement. In a study with ninety-four bereft participants, seventy-four percent perceived one or more ways in which the experience had led to positive change (Lehman et al., 1993).

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) claim that the posttraumatic growth model applies in the same way to major loss as it does to other types of life crises. They add that major loss can frequently lead to posttraumatic growth in three main life areas, namely that of: self-perception; relationships, and broader life philosophy. These categories provide an appropriate way to structure the following findings of studies pertaining to posttraumatic growth in the context of bereavement.

2.5.2.2.1 ***Growth in the area of self-perception.*** Positive changes to how individuals view themselves have been found to emerge as a result of the painful struggle with bereavement. Several studies found that individuals came to see themselves as stronger and more able to cope with difficulties as a result of the bereavement (Cadell, 2007; Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990; Davis et al., 1998; Lehman et al., 1993; Walsh, 2007). Similarly, individuals have reported perceiving themselves to be more independent and self-reliant as a result of the struggle with loss (Frantz et al., 1998; Lehman et al., 1993; Richards, 2001). Participants made claims such as: "I feel I can do anything", "I can count on myself" and "I will hang in there" (Richards, 2001, p. 187). Increases in self-esteem and self-worth as a consequence of the bereavement experience have also been found (Cadell, 2007; Richards, 2001). In a study on individuals who had been suddenly bereaved through a mine explosion, Davis et al. (2007) found that individuals who experienced the sudden bereavement as a threat to their sense of self were likely to later develop posttraumatic growth in the area of self-perception. More specifically, participants reported increased self-knowledge and perceptions of greater strength.

Bereavement has been found to lead some people to engage in creative expression, as a way of coping with the pain (Walsh, 2007). Letters and poetry, for example can constitute a creative memorial ritual (Richards, 2001). Connecting with the creative side of the self in this way has been found to be experienced as deeply meaningful – even when motivated by pain (Reynolds & Lim, 2007).

2.5.2.2.2 ***Growth in relationships.*** Growth in relationships has been found to occur as a result of the struggle with bereavement. Several studies found that grief led to a deepening of relationships with existing friends and family, as increased levels of social support were needed (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990, Frantz et al., 1998; Lehman et al., 1993). Studies support the claim that bereavement may lead individuals to clarify their priorities in life (Davis et al., 1998). With regards to bereavement, this particularly leads people to prioritise relationships more highly. Several studies reported that participants were more appreciative of their supportive relationships (Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Davis et al., 1998; Richards, 2001). Individuals were also found to report having a clearer sense of their relational needs (Cadell & Sullivan, 2006). Studies also identified an increase in empathy and compassion towards others in bereft participants (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990; Oltjenbruns, 1996, as cited in Frantz et al., 2001; Milo, 1997, as cited in Neimeyer et al., 2002). Bereft participants were found to experience a special connection to others who had suffered a loss (Walsh, 2007). Bereavement experiences were found to lead individuals to engage in altruistic pursuits such as volunteer work (Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Wheeler, 2001). Cadell and Sullivan (2006) described how participants' altruistic pursuits led to a spiritual sense of connectedness to humanity.

2.5.2.2.3 ***Existential growth.*** The issue of mortality is closely related to existential concerns, challenging one to grapple with issues surrounding "finitude, freedom and responsibility, isolation and meaning in life" (Yalom & Lieberman, 1991, p. 345). Bereavement can lead individuals to evaluate if they are living according to their values and priorities and making the most of their time on earth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). In a study of bereaved spouses, Yalom and Lieberman (1991) found that participants who had

chosen to engage with existential issues such as these evinced personal growth. Davis et al. (2007) studied individuals who had been bereaved following a mine explosion, and reported that individuals tended to struggle to make sense of this experience. It was found that individuals who were able to grow from this experience shifted from trying to find a reason for the death to searching for aspects of the experience that could enhance the meaningfulness of their own lives. Edmonds and Hooker (as cited in Frantz et al., 1998) found bereavement to be associated with existential growth such as clarified life goals. Several studies found that bereaved participants experienced a newfound appreciation of life that enabled them to live each day more fully (Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Frantz et al., 1998; Lehman et al., 1993). Several studies also reported that bereft participants reported being less afraid of death (Cadell, 2007; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990; Lehman et al., 1993; Richards, 2001).

2.5.2.2.4 ***Spiritual growth.*** Experiencing the death of a loved one frequently leads individuals to engage with spiritual considerations, such as concerning the existence of a higher power, an afterlife or fate (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). The death of a loved one can significantly challenge previously held spiritual beliefs, causing a period of re-examination. The result of this has been found to be variable: some may experience a detachment from previous spiritual beliefs, others may affirm previously held beliefs, and still others may come to experience new or deepened spiritual beliefs and experiences (Schwartzberg & Bulman, 1991; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Several studies reported that the experience of bereavement had been a catalyst for spiritual growth (Cadell, 2007; Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990, Lehman et al., 1993; Walsh, 2007).

Richards (2001) conducted a longitudinal study on individuals whose life partners had died. This study found that spirituality was reported to help bereft participants to cope with the intense pain of loss in the months following the death. Furthermore, spiritual beliefs provided a framework that allowed these participants to make sense of their experience and find meaning in life. It was also noted that spiritual beliefs enabled the bereaved to perceive that they experienced an ongoing relational connection to the deceased.

Furthermore, the findings of this study included an apparent shift in the role of spirituality in participants' lives three to four years after the death. Years after the death, spirituality had become more growth-orientated rather than a resource for coping with the pain of loss. At this time, participants reported experiencing a personal and active relationship with a higher power. They also perceived a continued sense of connection to the deceased, and their connection to the sacred informed the values that they lived by.

Several studies found that experiences of bereavement lead to a new belief in an afterlife. For example, Schwartzberg and Janoff-Bulman (1991), found this to be the case in sixty percent of participants. A study by Frantz, Trolley and Johll (as cited in Frantz et al., 2001) also found associations between bereavement and a belief in the existence of an afterlife. In a longitudinal study of bereaved men whose partners had died, Richards (2001) found that bereavement motivated many participants to grapple with the concept of an afterlife in order to construct an "acceptable and meaningful account of the location of the deceased partner" (p. 178). Participants' tended to envisage the deceased as either co-existing with other spirits or God in a spiritual realm, or alternatively that their partner's spirit had "merged into the essence of life, still remaining part of the whole of things, only in a different way" (Richards, 2001, p. 178).

Whereas traditional grief theory has emphasised the importance of severing ties with the deceased, there has been a shift in the bereavement literature towards acknowledging the adaptive role that maintaining a transformed yet continuing sense of connection with the deceased can play (Walsh, 2007). In reporting spiritual growth, studies found that bereft individuals frequently reported experiencing a spiritual relationship with the deceased. Many participants in Richard's study (2001) drew comfort and meaning from a perceived sense of continued connection with the deceased that involved the possibility for on-going communication. Participants in this study reported sensing a closeness to the deceased through dreams or in times of quiet reflection. They described having a sense of being guided by the deceased as well as being reassured of their well-being. This perception of a continued spiritual bond with the deceased was found to continue over time, as reported by

seventy percent of participants interviewed who were interviewed three to four years after the death.

The relevant terms relating to bereavement have been defined, and studies pertaining to posttraumatic growth in the context of bereavement have been reviewed. Posttraumatic growth in the context of bereavement reflects a shift in the bereavement research that acknowledges the transformative nature of grief (Znoj, 2006). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) claim that posttraumatic growth following bereavement may manifest within the areas of self-perception, relationships, and broader life philosophy. The findings of specific studies in this regard have been reviewed.

2.6 Limitations in the Current Posttraumatic Growth Literature

Posttraumatic growth is a phenomenon that is receiving growing attention internationally, however it is still a relatively new construct that is not fully understood (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). There appears to be sufficient evidence to suggest that growth after trauma is indeed a frequently occurring phenomenon. However, while the research done has laid the preliminary foundation of our understanding of posttraumatic growth, there are still several unresolved issues and limitations in current understanding of this phenomenon (Pat-Horenczyk & Brom, 2007, p. 380-381). A brief overview of these areas will now be presented.

Several researchers have called for increased clarity with regards to certain aspects of the posttraumatic growth model. Zoellner and Maercker (2006b) acknowledge the comprehensiveness of the posttraumatic growth model, but suggest that the variables involved should be more rigorously defined. This sentiment has been echoed by Pat-Horenczyk and Brom (2007) who also add that further investigation is needed in order to distinguish between growth following different types of trauma and of varying traumatic intensity. Park (2004) suggests that in particular, the rumination processes described in the model should be further developed. In this regard, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) agree that further exploration of the relationship between cognition and growth is warranted. Specifically, they suggest that future research should focus on: "(a) intrusive versus

deliberate cognitions, (b) the valence of the cognitions, (c) the content of the cognitions, (d) and the frequency and timing of cognitions" (p. 17).

Several researchers have drawn attention to aspects of growth that have not been sufficiently addressed by the posttraumatic growth model. McMillen (2004) has criticised the posttraumatic growth model for over-emphasising the role of cognition in the development of posttraumatic growth. In this regard, Zoellner and Maercker (2006b) call for greater recognition of the part that emotion plays in the development of posttraumatic growth. Armour (2003) draws attention to the importance of change being demonstrated behaviourally, and suggests that an emphasis on cognitive change needs to be viewed together with an action focus. McMillen (2004) adds that although socio-cultural factors are acknowledged in the posttraumatic growth model, the extent of their influence may be under-acknowledged. Continuing to extend investigations of posttraumatic growth in multicultural contexts is required (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

2.6.1 *Validity of Posttraumatic Growth Reports*

In a previous section labeled 2.4 *Overview of Alternative Models*, the contrast between models that conceptualise posttraumatic growth as an outcome or as a coping strategy has been discussed. This issue is closely related to questions of validity of reports of posttraumatic growth. If posttraumatic growth is understood to be a coping strategy that is employed in order to cope with distress, how much of it is authentic and how much is a defensive illusion? This question marks an unresolved debate in posttraumatic growth literature that warrants future investigation. Calhoun and Tedeschi, (2004) point out that the issue of bias is relevant for all self-report measures, not just those pertaining to posttraumatic growth.

Several studies have concluded that reports of growth do not tend to reflect a social desirability bias or a defensive function (Dohrenwend et al., 2004; Weinrib, Rothrock, Johnsen, & Lutgendorf, 2006; Wild & Paivio, 2003, as cited in Tedeschi et al., 2007). In contrast to claims that individuals tend to under-represent previous functioning in order to perceive growth (McFarland & Alvaro, 2000), Ransom (2006) concluded that individuals

were more likely to deny changes to the structure of the self even in the face of evidence of change. This is in line with cognitive dissonance theory which maintains that people may actually be more likely to understate growth after trauma as it is difficult to integrate the contrast between positive and negative aspects of trauma (Smith & Cook, 2004).

Several suggestions have been made as to how to distinguish between reports of growth that are illusory and those that are authentic. Zoellner and Maercker (2006b) suggest that posttraumatic growth may be illusory when reports of growth are incongruent with corresponding aspects of the individual's life. They add that reports of growth may also be illusory when individuals are unable to explore their reports of growth in a way that demonstrates depth and complexity of experience, or if they deny the negative effects of the trauma. Furthermore, they propose that reports that are detailed and emotionally congruent may be more likely to be valid. This is considered to be particularly so if the individual is able to report both positive and negative changes (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Park & Helgeson, 2006). Reports of growth are also more likely to be valid when they are accompanied by observable changes in behaviour (Rabe et al., 2006; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b). Weiss (2002) proposed that changes that are confirmed by other people in the trauma survivor's life may increase validity of reports of growth.

While awareness of issues pertaining to validity is necessary, Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) propose that it should be remembered that the individuals who are reporting growth perceive it to be a veridical outcome rather than a defensive coping strategy. Furthermore, Park and Helgeson (2006) maintain that "people's perceptions of growth may be more important in understanding their psychological experience and quality of life than measures of actual growth" (p. 794). They draw comparisons between this and the social support literature which generally concludes that the perception of social support is central to coping with adversity, whether or not these perceptions are accurate.

2.6.2 *Posttraumatic Growth and Adjustment*

Another unclear issue that warrants further investigation pertains to the implications that posttraumatic growth has on adjustment. Do people who demonstrate posttraumatic growth lead happier or healthier lives for it, or are adjustment and posttraumatic growth unrelated? Intuitively, one might expect reports of growth to correspond with improved well-being. However, studies on this area have yielded mixed results. Further investigation in this regard is therefore warranted.

Several studies have found a correlation between post-trauma adjustment and reports of posttraumatic growth. For example, Znoj and Keller (as cited in Park & Helgeson, 2006) found that posttraumatic growth was related to improved emotional regulation. Zubair (1999) found that an increased sense of meaning in life was highly correlated to mental well-being. Frazier (2004) concluded that trauma survivors who perceived their lives to have in some way been positively transformed are less likely to develop trauma-related disorders such as posttraumatic stress disorder.

There is tentative evidence to suggest that posttraumatic growth is associated with physiological wellbeing (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). Rabe et al. (2006) found reports of psychological growth to be associated with neurological functioning. Bower et al. (as cited in Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2004) found that HIV positive men who were able to perceive meaning in their experience showed less rapid CD4 level decline.

While the above-mentioned studies are promising, in general, studies have found the relationship between posttraumatic growth and adjustment to be inconclusive. While longitudinal studies have tended to support claims that posttraumatic growth is related to adjustment, cross-sectional studies have tended to yield contradictory findings (Pat-Horenczyk & Brom, 2007; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b). Zoellner and Maercker (2006b) suggest that this discrepancy may be accounted for by the hypothesis that initial reports of posttraumatic growth shortly after the trauma may represent an illusory, defensive function while later reports may tend to reflect more authentic growth. Perceptions of growth may therefore take time before having a positive impact on adjustment. They add that while

longitudinal studies are able to capture this process and accurately reflect ultimate adjustment, cross-sectional studies would reflect varied stages in this process. Davis et al. (1998) found that while participants reported positive changes six months after the loss, this was only related to decreased distress at a later stage. This suggests that the potential for perceived posttraumatic growth to positively impact on adjustment may involve a lengthy process.

Longitudinal studies – although difficult to implement – would shed more light on this issue. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) emphasise that posttraumatic growth and distress tend to co-exist and that the presence of one does not necessarily nullify the existence of the other. In addition, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) suggest that investigations into the relationship between posttraumatic growth and adjustment may benefit from broadening the definition of well-being beyond symptom reduction. Park (2004) proposes that different types of growth or different types of traumas may be linked to certain aspects of adjustment and not others and also suggests that researchers should refine and operationalise the question of how posttraumatic growth relates to adjustment. As a final point on this issue, the importance of ascertaining the relationship between posttraumatic growth and adjustment depends on whether the perception of growth is considered valuable in its own right, or whether emphasis is placed on growth as a means to some other consequence (Park, 2004). For the purposes of this study, the perception of growth is considered to be of primary significance.

2.7 Summary

This chapter began by placing the construct of posttraumatic growth in a historical context. This involved reference to ancient philosophies to existential psychology to the more recent movement of positive psychology in which the concept of posttraumatic growth is embedded. The development of the posttraumatic growth model was described, and the broad application of this construct in empirical research was addressed. Posttraumatic growth was defined and distinguished from other similar and related concepts. The stages and variables that are included in the posttraumatic growth model was then described. Alternative models and viewpoints were also presented. Thereafter,

the minimal South African research available on posttraumatic growth was addressed. This was followed by a review of specific studies pertaining to posttraumatic growth in the context of bereavement. Lastly, several limitations in the current posttraumatic growth literature were described. In particular, this referred to the contested issue of the validity of growth reports, as well as the unclear relationship between posttraumatic growth and adjustment.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

An exploratory, qualitative framework has been used in order to capture an in-depth perspective of the personal experience of posttraumatic growth. This study is located within an interpretivist paradigm which assumes that there is an "internal reality of subjective experience" (Terre Blanche & Durrheim, 1999, p. 6) that can be interpreted. Methodologies such as phenomenological approaches are located within this interpretivist framework (Lynch, 2005). In this study, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was utilised (Smith & Osborn, 2003). This chapter proceeds as follows: firstly, the aims of this study will be described. Thereafter, the reader will be familiarised with the theoretical underpinnings of IPA. Following that, a description of the processes of participant selection will be provided. This will be followed by a description of how data was collected and analysed. Lastly, reliability, validity and ethical considerations will be addressed.

3.1 Aims of the Study

This study has endeavoured to conduct an idiographic exploration of the experience of posttraumatic growth in the context of a traumatic bereavement. The focus has been on obtaining a nuanced, in-depth understanding of the meanings inherent in the participant's experience of posttraumatic growth. This has involved ascertaining how posttraumatic growth is perceived by the participant in terms of how such growth has developed, the nature of such growth, and the implications that this holds for the participant's lived experience. It was also intended that the analysis of the participant's experience of posttraumatic growth should illuminate the current theoretical understandings of this phenomenon.

3.2 Theoretical Foundations of IPA

Willig (2001) describes phenomenology as being concerned with how individuals experience their world. It attends to the meanings that the individual makes in interacting with their world. Phenomenology adheres to the ontological assumption that a fully accurate, objective knowledge of reality is not attainable, as experience is mediated by the

subjective meanings we ascribe to what we perceive. Therefore, it is more interested in the meanings of people's experiences and perceptions of the world rather than generating truth claims about the world. Willig (2001) adds that phenomenology is not a unified field, and that IPA is one of several methodological approaches situated within this field.

While rooted in phenomenology, IPA also has similarities with symbolic interactionism in that it assumes that individuals gain knowledge of their world through active interpretation (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Willig (2001) adds that IPA resonates with symbolic interactionism in that it assumes that individuals' interpretations of their world are not completely idiosyncratic and limitless, but are bound within their social context. IPA is consonant with discourse analysis in emphasising the role of language. However, whereas discourse analysis adopts a critical stance towards the ability of language to accurately represent the individual's internal experience, IPA views language as the medium through which the individual's experience can be accessed (Chapman & Smith, 2002). However, IPA acknowledges that the ability to linguistically represent internal experience is a complex one (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Willig (2001) points out the ways in which IPA and Grounded Theory are similar and different. They are said to be similar in their shared interest in cognition, use of thematic analysis, and inductive approach. However, whereas Grounded Theory was developed in order to study broader social dynamics, IPA was specifically designed to focus on the individual. While Grounded Theory provides a socially embedded account of phenomena, IPA is more focused on capturing the "nature or essence of phenomena" (Willig, 2001, p. 69). Brocki and Wearden (2006) add that whereas grounded theory attempts to attain broadly generaliseable claims, IPA is more interested in exploring similarities and differences in fewer participants.

IPA attempts to obtain an in-depth understanding of how individuals' experience certain phenomena. It is interested in gaining knowledge of how participants make sense of their world, and the meaning they ascribe to particular phenomena (Smith & Osborn, 2003). IPA assumes that individuals are naturally inclined to attempt to make sense of their experiences, and IPA studies strive to explore these processes (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). IPA assumes a "relativist ontology" (Willig, 2001, p. 66) in its acknowledgement that

experience is mediated through our subjective appraisals. Therefore, IPA is interested in perceptions of the world rather than trying to make truth claims about the nature of the world (Willig, 2001).

Smith (2004) describes IPA as: "idiographic, inductive, interrogative" (p. 39). IPA upholds an idiographic approach in contrast to a nomothetic approach, and favours small sample sizes and case studies (Smith, 2004). Brocki and Wearden (2006) maintain that IPA sampling tends to select participants who will shed light on particular phenomena rather than aiming to attain a representative sample. They claim that the quality of the study should be primarily evaluated on the researcher's ability to bring the nuances of the participants' experiences to light rather than in its generalisable value. Having said this, although IPA prioritises the importance of capturing a richly detailed understanding of experience, it does not eschew generalisability. Smith (2004) maintains that an idiographic approach illuminates the experience of individuals so richly that it makes it possible for others to engage with analyses and to identify with certain aspects of the account. Paradoxically, "delving deeper into the particular also takes us closer to the universal" (Smith, 2004, p. 42). IPA increases generalisability one in-depth, small-scale study at a time (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). The findings of one IPA study are built on by others, which increasingly allows for claims to be generalised (Chapman & Smith, 2002).

As Smith (2004) describes, IPA favours an inductive position as opposed to a deductive approach. Rather than setting out to test focused hypotheses, IPA research questions are more general and inclusive. This is said to allow for flexibility so that the analyses can accommodate unforeseen aspects of the participants' experience. However, Smith (2004) admits that while an inductive approach is emphasised, in reality, a deductive stance is not fully avoidable.

Smith (2004) describes IPA as interrogative in that analyses are discussed in such a way that shed light on the extant literature, thereby contributing to existing research. IPA studies are particularly useful when investigating poorly understood phenomena in that the analyses do not require a theoretical foundation. However, IPA is flexible in that it is

permissible to draw on existing theory in order to make sense of the data (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Drawing on theory is usually done at a latter stage of the analyses, being careful to allow the phenomenological experience of participants to inductively emerge (Smith, 2004). Brocki and Wearden (2006) claim that IPA's inductive approach enables researchers to "discuss their analysis in the light of varied existing psychological theories, models or approaches" (p. 96).

3.2.1 *Role of the Researcher*

IPA theory acknowledges that it is not possible to directly and accurately access another person's internal world (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Even when participants describe their experience, the participant's words are not automatically understood by the researcher. Rather, the researcher understands the participant's accounts by engaging with and interpreting them. The researcher is understood not to be neutral and objective in this regard, but brings to their interpretation his or her own subjectivity. IPA explicitly acknowledges and accepts the active role of the researcher. Smith and Osborn (2003) describe this as a "double hermeneutic" (p. 51) in that while "the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of the world" (p. 51). The dual stance of observer-participant is advocated in IPA methodology, whereby an empathic understanding is balanced with a critical one. In IPA, an empathic position dominates, but this is complemented by a more distanced, analytical stance. This dual perspective is considered to allow for a fuller perspective of the participant's experience (Smith, 2004). IPA is understood to be both phenomenological and interpretative. This is because an understanding of the participant's lived experience is sought, but at the same time, it is acknowledged that the final analysis is based on the researcher's interpretations of this experience (Willig, 2001). This is said to involve an acceptance that the researcher's subjective interpretations are necessary in order to come to an understanding of the participants' experience. The final analysis is therefore a co-construction of the researcher and the participants' reflections (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

While the researcher's interpretations are valued as insights rather than facts, a reflexive stance is advocated (Willig, 2001). Brocki and Wearden (2006) claim that acknowledging

their subjectivity allows researchers to bracket their preconceived ideas and keep interpretations firmly embedded in the data. They argue that while acknowledging one's subjectivity enhances transparency, more IPA researchers should explicitly state their subjective position. In this regard, the researcher of this study was aware that she was coming from a perspective that was located within western psychological discourse – that of a positive psychological perspective in particular. The researcher was conscious of being particularly interested in growth. However, as a therapist, the researcher understood growth to be complex. The researcher had not personally experienced traumatic bereavement in her own life. Being aware of this position, the researcher was able to make a conscious effort to minimise bias and to ground interpretations in the data.

3.2.2 *Evaluating IPA*

Although an increasingly popular methodological approach, IPA has not escaped criticism. Willig (2001) has pointed out several limitations in IPA methodology: Firstly, IPA has been criticised for its strong emphasis on cognition over other aspects of a person's experience. Secondly, while proponents of IPA acknowledge the constructive nature of the researcher's interpretations, IPA procedure then refers to themes *emerging* as if they are definitive, concrete entities. Thirdly, IPA has received criticism pertaining to the issue of language. Willig (2001) argues that IPA does not sufficiently acknowledge the role that language plays in constructing, rather than just reflecting, reality. However, Smith and Osborn (2003) have acknowledged that while they assume that language can access individuals' internal experience, this is not a straight-forward process. Another language-related concern is that IPA fails to adequately capture the nuanced experience of those who are not fully fluent in the language used in the particular study (Willig, 2001).

While IPA has received criticisms, its strengths have also been recognised. IPA offers a clear methodological approach, a solid theoretical foundation, and a growing body of published studies (Chapman & Smith, 2002). Brocki and Wearden (2006) describe IPA as a flexible approach that allows space for creativity. They add that IPA's ability to be used with or without a theoretical perspective is a particular strength.

There are several factors that support the use of IPA in studies concerning posttraumatic growth, and these will now be mentioned. Park and Lechner (2006) point out that a qualitative approach to studying posttraumatic growth enable a more complete perspective of growth to emerge. They add that flexible interviews allow the essential meanings of reports of posttraumatic growth to be grasped. Zoellner and Maercker (2006b) have also noted the value of using a qualitative, idiographic approach to investigating posttraumatic growth. They point out that this is especially appropriate as posttraumatic growth is as yet not fully understood. IPA is able to shed light on areas that are not well understood, and it is able to be applied in conjunction with a theoretical perspective. As a qualitative method, IPA intends to capture the in-depth, richly nuanced understanding of the participant's experience. IPA has also been found to be especially useful in dealing with existential and identity-related issues and when investigating "life transforming or life threatening events" (Smith, 2004, p. 49). As Smith (2004) concludes: "if a researcher is interested in exploring participants' personal and lived experiences, in looking at how they make sense and meaning from those experiences, and in pursuing a detailed idiographic case study examination, then IPA is a likely candidate" (p. 48).

3.3 Participant Selection

Convenience sampling was used to attract respondents according to predetermined inclusion criteria. Inclusion criteria stipulated that participants should be Rhodes students between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Participants needed to speak English fluently and be willing to share their story openly with the researcher. Participants needed to have experienced trauma at least six months prior to interviewing. It was also imperative that participants perceived that their struggle with trauma had ultimately led to psychological growth. Posters were put up around campus in order to attract respondents (See Appendix D). These posters provided a description of the purpose and nature of the study, as well as the researcher's contact details. They also reminded readers that if necessary, therapists at the Counselling Centre were available.

The participant involved in this study responded to the posters and interviews were arranged. The individual, who shall henceforth be named "Sheila", met inclusion criteria.

Sheila is a 25 year old white female. At the time of interviewing she was completing an honours degree in psychology. She witnessed the car accident in which her mother died. This traumatic event occurred twelve years ago, when she was 13 years old. Her story was considered to be sufficiently rich and complex in order to justify a single case study approach. This is in keeping with calls to increase the use of case studies with single participants in IPA research, as they provide an especially nuanced and revealing analysis (Smith, 2004). Individuals who responded to the posters subsequent to participant selection were thanked for their time and were reminded that therapists at the Student Counselling Centre were available if needed.

3.4 Data Collection

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data for this study. This is according to suggested IPA methodology. Semi-structured interviews allow rapport to develop, enable complex data to be elicited, and allow the freedom to pursue unforeseen areas. They also enable the researcher to be active in prompting and guiding discussion while simultaneously permitting participants the freedom to tell their story in their own way (Smith and Osborn, 2003).

An interview schedule was constructed based on the domains identified in the posttraumatic growth literature (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), (See Appendix E). Brocki and Wearden (2006) point out that while many IPA studies base their interview schedule on established literature, reflexivity is important in order to be aware of potential biases that this may incur. Smith and Osborn (2003) maintain that the interview schedule should be followed as far as it is useful in bringing about an understanding of participants' experience. However, they stress that this should be flexible rather than a rigid guide. They point out that unforeseen areas often emerge that are worthy of investigation. Therefore, how much leeway is permitted in diverging from the interview schedule is suggested to be determined at the researcher's discretion.

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with Sheila, totaling three hours of interview time. This follows on from other IPA studies that have also conducted two semi-structured interviews with a single participant (e.g. Eatough & Smith, 2006; Meek, 2007).

The first interview was focused on allowing Sheila to share her story in full. The second interview involved clarifying and further exploring certain points, ensuring that all areas of the interview schedule had been addressed. This follow-up interview also allowed Sheila the opportunity to add to or modify aspects of our previous discussion.

Once permission for taping had been obtained, interviews were audiotaped. They were then accurately transcribed. Following IPA procedure, pages were divided into three columns (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The transcribed text was positioned in the central column, and a column was left open on each side of the text for subsequent analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

The data analysis conducted in this study followed the IPA methodological approach as stipulated by Smith and Osborn (2003). They stress that IPA is a flexible rather than prescriptive methodology, and acknowledge that it may sometimes be necessary to adapt this method to best suit a particular topic. A description of the application of their IPA approach now follows.

3.5.1 *Identifying Themes*

The meanings within the text takes time to grasp, and therefore the first step of data analysis involved becoming familiar with the text by reading through transcripts several times. With each reading of the text, the researcher used the left hand side of the page to note any initial impressions that came to mind. These included, for example, short summaries, rewording, associated links, contrasts and early interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The next step in analysis involved making notes in the right hand margin of tentative or "emergent themes" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 71) themes. This was done by converting

the initial comments that were in the left hand margin into more precise phrases that encapsulated the core meanings of the text. These phrases tended to involve a "slightly higher level of abstraction and may invoke more psychological terminology" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 68).

3.5.2 *Connecting Themes*

In accordance with IPA guidelines, emergent themes were listed on a separate page and the researcher attempted to grasp how they were related to and connected to each other. These emergent themes were then grouped and a label was assigned to each grouping. These labels constituted the "superordinate" themes" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 72). A list of superordinate themes and their associated sub-themes was compiled (See Appendix F). An "identifier" (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 72) was attached to each of the constituent superordinate themes in order to identify its origin in the data. The researcher found that it was possible to group the superordinate themes further, and a broader categorical label was assigned.

A final list of six categorised superordinate themes was compiled (See Appendix F). These are: "The experience of the traumatic bereavement and its aftermath", "Posttraumatic growth in the area of self-perception", "Changes to the interpersonal domain", "Existential posttraumatic growth", "Spiritual posttraumatic growth", and "Concomitant growth and distress". The first of these ("The experience of the traumatic bereavement and its aftermath") involves a description of the actual trauma and its aftermath. As such, it is presented in the Results chapter (See section 4.1). The theme "Changes to the interpersonal domain" is somewhat different to the others in that it involves reference to both positive and negative effects of the trauma. This was in order to accurately portray the participant's experience. As suggested in IPA methodology, three superordinate themes (namely: "Miscellaneous", "Shame", and "Other Sources of Growth") were dropped as they were not sufficiently rich or relevant. The remaining categories of superordinate themes were than presented in the results chapter for subsequent discussion. In presenting and discussing these IPA themes, it was important to clearly differentiate between the participant's words and the researcher's own reflections (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

3.6 Reliability and Validity

IPA acknowledges the active and constructive role of the researcher and denies the possibility of an objectively perceived reality. Having said this, the researcher made attempts to minimise bias and uphold the trustworthiness of the analysis as far as possible.

3.6.1 *Reliability of the study*

The researcher strived to maintain reliability by IPA guidelines (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Verbatim comments were used throughout the analyses in order to transparently demonstrate how interpretations were linked to the data. Brocki and Wearden (2006) note that several IPA studies have strived to attain interrater reliability. This was also the case in this study, whereby an independent researcher checked that the interpretations and themes that were attained were grounded in the data.

3.6.2 *Validity of the study*

Prior to commencing interviews, the researcher told Sheila that although this study was focusing on growth, growth is often a complex experience that may be closely related to negative changes. Therefore, the researcher was interested in her holistic experience of the traumatic bereavement. Sheila was advised to focus on sharing her story as authentically as possible rather than trying to limit her account to positive changes. This was emphasised in order to remove any possible pressure that Sheila may have felt to inflate the growth aspects of her experience.

Brocki and Wearden (2006) point out that IPA guidelines do not specify to what degree the researcher should share his or her interpretations with the participant during the interview. During interviews with Sheila, the researcher attempted to put tentative interpretations and reflections across to her so that they could be clarified and checked. In particular, efforts were taken to clarify which aspects of growth were perceived to be attributed to the struggle with traumatic bereavement, as opposed to other sources. These efforts were taken in order to try to ensure validity.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

The researcher was committed to upholding ethical requirements throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained both verbally and in writing (See Appendix C). This involved explaining the voluntary, anonymous and potentially sensitive nature of the study. In addition, signed consent for permission to tape the interviews was obtained (See Appendix B). In the event that Sheila may have become distressed during interviews and was in need of containment, she was made aware that one of the therapists at the Student Counselling Centre was available to meet with her. However, Sheila was already engaged in a personal counselling process. Sheila was informed that if she so wished, the general findings of the study would be made available to her once the study was completed. As she expressed an interest in this, follow-up contact to arrange this will be made.

3.8 Summary

This chapter began by clarifying the aims of this idiographic IPA study as an exploration of the experience of posttraumatic growth. The theoretical foundations of IPA were then discussed. The researcher described the process of participant selection and data collection and demonstrated how IPA was used to elicit themes. Reliability, validity and ethical issues were attended to.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Before presenting the themes that emerged in the data analysis, it is necessary to attend to conceptual clarity. Therefore, the researcher will first demonstrate how Sheila's experience can be understood to be traumatic bereavement. Thereafter, the themes pertaining to posttraumatic growth will be presented.

4.1 Defining Sheila's Experience as Traumatic Bereavement

In the broad sense, Sheila's experience is one of bereavement, or the "experience of losing to death a person to whom one is attached" (Zhang et al., 2006, p. 1188). More specifically, however, Sheila's experience can be described as "traumatic bereavement" (Black & Tuffnell, 2006, p. 465; Neria & Litz, 2003, p. 78). What follows is a brief discussion of how Sheila's experience of her mother's death can be considered to be "traumatic bereavement". Once this has been clarified, the themes that emerged in the data analysis will be presented.

Sheila witnessed the car accident in which her mother died. This event occurred twelve years ago, when she was 13 years old. She portrays this tragedy as overwhelming and completely outside the range of normal experience: "It was, it was sh (short laugh) so extreme! It was like...so beyond anything" (3). This experience was so overwhelming for Sheila that she was unable to talk about it for a long time afterwards: "So like or – I don't think any of us...I know I couldn't talk about it, I just couldn't talk about it. I'd just cry and cry and cry. And my sister would be like, 'you know, it happened'" (32).

Sheila described how her family was so devastated that they were unable to communicate with each other and support each other for the first five years after her mother died. Her use of the word "coasting" denotes that her remaining family members were trying to cope in isolation from each other, without supporting each other on a meaningful level: "I suppose I think my family was doing coasting kind of stuff. Because we weren't getting involved in each others' emotions at all. It was very superficial. And I would say that was actually for the first five years" (235). Sheila expressed resentment at her family's lack of

communication and support at this time: "It just it wasn't part of the family discourse. And um ja that – that makes me angry now, because we should have" (5). Sheila expressed that this lack of support was experienced as disempowering:

> And I mean, you see the thing is I was a victim in a way. But I was also...I just didn't have access to different choices, so I didn't have access to myself...and um, ja because I didn't have any support, really (33).

The text revised fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) defines an event as traumatic when it involves direct experience of threat to the physical being of the self or another, and when the reaction to this event was one of extreme anxiety, a sense of defenselessness or confused behaviour. Following from this definition, it can be said that Sheila experienced her mother's death as a traumatic event. She witnessed it directly, and she experienced it as completely overwhelming and bewildering. It was a horrific event that was completely beyond the realm of normative experience. That there were no words for months after the event but rather overwhelming affect suggests that Sheila was unprepared for it psychologically, and this experience was not easily assimilable. Struggling to accept and make sense of her mother's death, Sheila's family were unable to acknowledge it to each other for years afterwards. Sheila's experience therefore fits the definition of trauma as being an extremely challenging experience that threatens previous taken for granted assumptions about the world (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). While Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) admit that their definition of trauma is broader than others, it has been shown that Sheila's experience also fits more focused definitions such as that of the text revised, fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000).

Sheila's bereavement, which involved her mother dying in a sudden, unexpected, accidental and untimely way constitutes "traumatic bereavement" (Black & Tuffnell, 2006, p. 465; Neria & Litz, 2003, p. 78). Sheila's experience was extremely stressful, both due to witnessing her mother's death, as well as having to adjust to the abrupt separation from her mother at a very young age. Her experience therefore involves both trauma and bereavement, and these dual aspects are inseparable in the phenomenology of Sheila's

experience. As previously mentioned, Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) propose that the posttraumatic growth model applies in the same way to experiences of major loss as it does to trauma. It is not possible to speculate convincingly about whether or not Sheila's reaction to traumatic bereavement manifested in such a way that met diagnostic criteria for disorders such as posttraumatic stress disorder or complicated grief disorder. Insufficient evidence is provided, and the interviews occurred more than a decade after the event. Therefore, speculations in this regard have been avoided. However, as has been argued, the term "traumatic bereavement" appropriately describes Sheila's experience, and this term will be used henceforth.

4.2 Presentation of Themes

Data analysis yielded several posttraumatic growth themes. Before these are attended to, several points need to be stressed. Posttraumatic growth refers to trauma-induced changes that exceed previous levels of functioning (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). Therefore, it was important to clarify with Sheila what positive changes could be attributed to the experience of coping with her mother's death as opposed to other sources of growth. In addition, it was necessary to carefully tease out positive changes that exceeded pretrauma levels. Another point that needs to be mentioned is that while posttraumatic growth themes have been presented, such growth exists in the context of great pain. The existence of positive changes do not negate the reality of the negative impact of trauma.

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) propose that posttraumatic growth can manifest as positive changes with regards to self-perception, relating to others, and life philosophy. Sheila experiences posttraumatic growth in each of these domains, as will be demonstrated.

With regards to posttraumatic growth in the area of self-perception, several aspects are salient. Sheila experiences increased self-awareness and a greater sense of self-worth as a result of her struggle with traumatic bereavement. She also has a deeper understanding of pain, and this allows her to cope with it better. In addition, coping with this experience has led Sheila to perceive an increased sense of independence and self-sufficiency. Lastly,

struggling with the loss has caused her to engage in novel ways of self-expression, thereby enabling her to experience herself as a more creative person.

With regards to the interpersonal domain, Sheila expressed mixed positive and negative effects of the traumatic bereavement. Since these mixed aspects were described as being so closely related, they will be presented as such. This will then be followed by a description of posttraumatic growth within the interpersonal domain. Sheila's experience of relational posttraumatic growth is reflected in a deepened desire and ability to help others. This is manifested in three ways: Firstly, Sheila experiences a special connection to others who have suffered a loss, which enables her to meet their emotional needs. Secondly, she desires to use what her struggle with bereavement has taught her about coping and healing to support others. Thirdly, she aspires to help others through her passion for wilderness therapy. Within this area of wilderness therapy, Sheila integrates her interest in psychology with her deepened environmental values – both of which have also been attributed to her struggle with traumatic bereavement.

Sheila's struggle with traumatic bereavement has led to spiritual growth. Being confronted with her mother's death has strengthened her belief in a spiritual realm and led her to develop a clearer spiritual belief system. On an existential level, Sheila reported perceiving a clearer sense of her purpose. This purpose is centred on making a positive contribution to the world. Living purposefully allows her to honour her mother, which thereby enables her to find meaning in her mother's death.

4.2.1 Posttraumatic Growth in the Area of Self-perception

Sheila expressed that she has experienced meaningful personal growth since her traumatic bereavement. However, she does not attribute her personal growth solely to coping with traumatic bereavement, but also to the impact of natural maturational development, positive relationships and experiences within the field of psychology (although being drawn to psychology was in itself a consequence of the traumatic bereavement). Therefore, not all aspects of Sheila's personal growth will be presented for discussion but only the parts that Sheila specifically attributes to the experience of traumatic bereavement.

Sheila's mother's death initially posed a threat to her sense of identity. She spoke of a "reawakening" of self which occurred years after her mother's death:

> Ja, it [the tendency to care for others] has definitely always been in my nature. Ja, um but my nature only really being reawakened in the last five years. The first five years where I didn't talk to other people about it, talk to the family (241).

This concept of a "reawakening" suggests that there was a loss of certain aspects of her identity. Therefore, resolving the traumatic bereavement involved reconstructing or re-connecting with a sense of self. As a result of the struggle with traumatic bereavement, Sheila's sense of self has been altered in several positive ways. Sheila acknowledges this impact, saying: "the way I see myself is completely – it's so influenced by um not having my mom around" (129). In contrast to the concept of resilience where survivors recover from trauma without experiencing significant change, Sheila's sense of self was first negatively impacted, and subsequently reconstructed in such a way that has yielded growth. As Sheila expressed in the following comment, recovering from the traumatic bereavement involved change rather than a return to how things were before her mother died:

> I would say it's back to equilibrium in a way, um but it can never be that because my mom's gone. So equilibrium isn't the same. It's like – but it's good though, whatever it is, the reawakening. It all ties in with a sense of self (243).

Posttraumatic growth in the domain of self-perception is reflected in four aspects, namely: increased self-awareness and self-worth; perceiving herself as having become able to cope with pain better; increased independence, and heightened creativity. Each of these will be presented in the following section.

4.2.1.1 *Increased Self-awareness*

Sheila's struggle with traumatic bereavement has contributed to an increase in self-awareness. This has occurred in two ways: firstly, as a direct and natural outcome of struggling with the traumatic bereavement, and secondly, as an intentionally pursued goal. A key example of the latter involves Sheila's involvement in psychology as a result of the traumatic bereavement. Journaling is also an activity that Sheila has made extensive use of since her mother's death that facilitates self-awareness.

Sheila believes that her experience of traumatic bereavement was so penetrative and challenging that it ultimately led to increased self-awareness. She described how the intimate nature of grief caused her to experience different aspects of herself: "So it [the traumatic bereavement] will always be integrated into who I am because I know who I am. And I know who I am because I've felt every thing of me, every part of me" (136).

As will be shown in the section *Heightened Creativity*, Sheila was compelled to engage in journaling activity since her mother's death. This introspection contributes towards self-awareness:

> Like whenever I'm alone I see it as an opportunity to um explore things that I'm thinking and feeling about things in my life at that point in time or in the past. And that's inspired lots of journaling and things like that (228).

Sheila's experience of traumatic bereavement also increased her desire to understand herself more fully, which is considered to have led her to study psychology. She has experienced this involvement in psychology as validating her identity and experiences. Sheila stated: "I would probably say that because of the trauma I wanted to explore my own psychology" (276). She also spoke of a particular honours module that she completed as being: "very reaffirming – reaffirming of who I was and the way I thought and the way I experienced things. And how I – how I understood therapy to be completely based on relationships" (201).

Sheila expressed that following her mother's death, she has had to learn to acknowledge the grieving, vulnerable part of herself and also to connect with a self-comforting part. She has named these the "Little Girl" and "The Nurturer" respectively. She describes the process towards awareness and acceptance of these two sides to herself:

> Ja, so I was a little girl. And then I was a teenager – but a hurt teenager, and then like a pissed off, rebellious one. But the Little Girl was still with me the whole time um because she hadn't been – she hadn't been spoken to by anyone, including me. I was just subjected to her feelings and like stuff, and then sort of ups and downs with adolescence. And then um – and then finishing school, getting some independence, getting a job, doing my um tertiary university correspondence, which is also a sense of independence and autonomy, where the Little Girl got – got forgotten still because she still hadn't been talked to and um. And there was a small part of me, The Nurturer who had through my studies and through my experiences um sort of

> come to light about eight years after – no, six – no, I'd say five years after. Okay 13 to 20, seven years of carrying the Little Girl. 20 to 23, um being aware of the Little Girl and The Nurturer being born or becoming accessible, um 23. Turning 24, being in an excellent environment, the Little Girl was picked up and held and The Nurturer grew. And um then this year I turned 25, and the Little Girl's with me all the time. And – but – but I love myself enough to say it's okay for her to come with (160).

4.2.1.2 *Increased Sense of Self-worth*

Sheila attributes her increased sense of self-worth to various sources, such as to rewarding academic and interpersonal experiences. However, the researcher has teased out increased self-worth that Sheila directly attributes to her struggle with traumatic bereavement. This has been a process, and it is clear that Sheila's experience of traumatic bereavement initially impacted negatively on her self-confidence and self-worth. In the following comment she refers to the grieving part of herself as "the little kid". She described how – until recently – this part of her had held her back: "I think um I felt a dichotomy between the two: one half of me really felt that I could do better, and the other half holding me back and being the little kid" (158).

Eventually, as Sheila became increasingly able to cope with the traumatic bereavement, it has had a positive impact on her sense of self-worth. Having survived such extreme pain affords her a sense of being set apart as an individual which affirms her sense of identity. When asked about the impact of having gone through this ordeal, Sheila expressed: "I do kind of feel special in a way. Like, and different. And that's really cool because it adds to my uniqueness, and then that links straight to who I know I am" (212).

Sheila expressed that during difficult times, affirming her self-worth helps her to cope. Sheila stated: "Ja, so an upcoming challenge has definitely, you know, 'The pressure is on!' Like it helps. Ja, which is tied in with self-worth, it helps. It's a circular thing" (150). Sheila elaborated on this point in saying: "And like I realised then that actually, if I think I'm a very important person, I'll do very important things and activities in life, and I'll get what I want" (152). The following metaphor encapsulates this concept of affirming self-worth in the face of threat:

> About two weeks before that I'd been walking in the garden and I'd said to myself that I was a very important person – oh yes, I'd watched Men in Black, it's a silly little like stream of consciousness. But in Men in Black, there's – the alien picks up this girl and he's taking her back to the alien spacecraft and he's like, "It's a long trip, I'll need a snack." And then she's like, "I'm a very important person on my planet! A queen even!" And like – and then she's like freaking out. And he's like, "Well, whatever, your majesty." And he throws her up into the tree or whatever. But when she says that, like in defense of self, "I'm a very important person, you can't eat me." Like that, that went straight into – straight to my head (152).

Sheila spoke of "The Nurturer" learning to relate to the "Little Girl". This is a metaphor that represents her growth in learning to accept and comfort the part of her that is grieving. Sheila described how she has come to a point in her life where she has been able to do this. The following comments demonstrate her sense that learning to accept her pain serves to deepen her sense of creativity as well as a sense of connection to her mother. Integrating the experience of traumatic bereavement therefore leads to a sense of her being a deeper, enriched person. As Sheila said: "And um then this year I turned 25, and the Little Girl's with me all the time. And – but I love myself enough to say it's okay for her to come with" (160). Accepting her pain and vulnerability is experienced as self-enriching, as is clear in the following comment:

> Because we [the Little Girl and The Nurturer] help each other, I'm sure. The Little Girl is incredibly creative – like some of the stuff, and like the links – I mean she knows my mom better than I do, in a way (162).

4.2.1.3 *Able to Cope with Pain Better*

Sheila has learnt much about coping and healing through her experience of traumatic bereavement. This insight helps her to cope with pain, which is something she is proud of. Sheila uses the metaphor of a seed growing through snow to capture how she conceptualises her healing process. This metaphor illustrates that in the aftermath of grief, she experienced the world as bleak and cold and that she had retreated into herself for a time in order to cope. She described that following this period of "hibernation" there came a time when she was able to connect with her pain. While the pain of missing her mother remains, she perceives herself as having grown strong enough to cope. This metaphor also contains her sense of hope that she will continue to grow stronger: "It's like a seed under

the snow. It sits there the whole winter just being a seed and not being eaten" (117). Sheila elaborated that it's:

> Like hibernation. And then, ja, when your hearts strong enough to say, 'Okay, I'll open up now to all the hurt and all the pain from – from then'. Um and it hasn't changed, I mean, like at all. It's the same hurt, the same pain and the same feeling of loss and being lost. Um but there's also, I don't know, it doesn't engulf anymore. It's like the snow is still there but the seed has sprouted, so its leaves are strong, it can grow through that. And the snow's going to turn into water, so it still needs that. So it's both. It's nice, I like – I like how I think, I like how I deal with most things like more and more (118).

While the experience of loss has been extremely painful and difficult, in some ways it has made Sheila a stronger person. Having survived tremendous pain, she has learnt to cope with it. She reported that as a result of her struggle, she has grown more accepting of pain in general: "Like I'm reiterating but I think it would definitely be the fact that I'm not afraid of being sad" (223).

Sheila has a sense that she has confronted the worst possible pain (what she calls "rock bottom") and has survived it. This renders pain no longer something to fear and also allows for a sense of hope and optimism in the face of hardship. Therefore, Sheila's wisdom and strength of self in being able to cope with pain is understood as posttraumatic growth. She explained no longer fearing "rock bottom":

> And also knowing that it could only get better from here, so actually it's not that big a deal. You know I don't have to be scared of rock bottom anymore 'cause...And it's not only a it-can't-get-worse-than-this like pessimistic thing. It's well, this is as bad as it gets! (laughing) (147).

Sheila elaborates by saying that having experienced extreme pain does not dilute the severity of subsequent pain. While she still feels upset by negative experiences, she has developed knowledge and skills that help her to understand and cope with pain. Having struggled with traumatic bereavement does not dull subsequent pain, but it has allowed her to respond differently to it. This point is captured in the following comment:

> I can't really say that everything is relative to it, and that I don't get as sad. Because sometimes things lead me straight back to that same sadness, and it links back and it's just the same. But I think just my coping with that sadness, my understanding of that

> sadness is at a level where it will always be – it's hit rock bottom and it's going back now (136).

Sheila uses humour in order to deflate the power of pain to hurt her. For example, this was demonstrated when she compared the concept of "rock bottom" to a matter as trivial as a hangover:

> And rock bottom, like now that I know where rock bottom is or how it feels, like it's not as scary? It's almost like a joke, actually. Like my friend and I, we used to – 'cause she had gone through similar drama, and after long nights of partying we would wake up the next morning and feel like hungover, badly hungover. And be like: "This is rock bottom, hey?" And we'd make big jokes about being at rock bottom and knowing that this is rock bottom (147).

Sheila's strength in not being afraid of sadness enabled her to take an active role in facilitating her family's healing. She described a recent incident where she broke the silence and encouraged her family to talk about her mother:

> And it was so cool because I felt like I was kind of facilitating like dialogue between us three as family members and as people who had like lost my mom and missed her and knew different parts of her and should share these things. And it worked, it was so cool. Like my dad was crying, my sister was crying and like we all were holding hands. And my dad told us the story of how like um how they had met and how my mom had chosen him as being the father of her children...how – how he missed her and... all this stuff that had never happened before (6).

This occasion represented a breakthrough in Sheila's family. She contrasts her family's current growth-orientated processing with her family's previous struggle to cope in the distressing aftermath of her mother's death:

> So I think we're coping – it's like sort of the mechanics of the coping mechanism are the same but for different reasons now. Like before it was to cope and to coast and to be okay, and now it's to build and to fix and to explore (237).

Sheila is proud that she was able to take this role in her family. She feels that the experience of traumatic bereavement provided an opportunity for her to connect with and demonstrate her strength:

> I didn't shy away from it, I didn't make excuses about 'well maybe this wasn't a good idea' because I knew that I was strong enough to handle it. And because I was strong enough I'd be able to...sort of...lead in a way, you know like, ja. So, this is as a

> consequence of the trauma, you know. It obviously wouldn't have happened if it hadn't happened (9).

Having a sense that she has attained understanding and skills that enable her to cope with pain, Sheila has a deep confidence in her ability to cope with future hardships. She stated: "I know that I can do it, I know that no matter what happens to me I'll still be able to – I'll be fine" (143).

4.2.1.4 *Increased Independence and Self-reliance*

Although Sheila acknowledges her need for social support, Sheila's struggle with traumatic bereavement has fostered confidence in her ability to be self-reliant, independent and responsible. This does not detract from acknowledging her need for emotional support from others. Furthermore, increased independence would be expected to increase following her mother's death, as she made the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Therefore other experiences such as getting a job and obtaining a degree at university have also served to increase her autonomy. However, Sheila described how her mother's death confronted her with assuming new responsibilities. While completing these tasks was difficult, they ultimately led to a sense of achievement that increased her confidence in being able to rely on herself. She pointed out that this was growth born of necessity: "I think it's part of that 'taking responsibility' thing um. Because ja, I mean, I had to, but I didn't want to. But I had to, and when you have to do something, you just have to" (108). Sheila also stated: "It makes me proud, where I'm at now, and I'm really happy. And like I wish I'd had help, but I didn't. Which makes me a little bit more proud" (163).

Growing up without her mother meant that Sheila had to take on more responsibility than her peers. Certain tasks that were taken for granted by people whose parents were available were highly challenging for Sheila. For example, Sheila spoke of the difficulty of arranging to get her identification document by herself, and how achieving this made her feel proud: "It was like I could rub it in anybody's face, and say, 'look, you know, I got this, I did it myself'. Most people, you know, get bored and their parents register them" (103).

Similarly, Sheila is proud of the way that she became involved with wilderness therapy on her own accord. This is something that she believes her mother would have made convenient for her had she still been alive. She spoke of her volunteering at the children's nature camp as something that affirmed her independence and agency: "And like the fact that I – I led myself to xxx [the camp] and made the right choices so that I had access to it gives me a sense of like um autonomy and stuff" (90).

4.2.1.5 *Heightened Creativity*

Needing to process her mother's death has led to novel creative expression in various forms. This experience therefore enabled Sheila to be more in touch with the creative part of herself which she perceives as meaningful and unique. Creative expression serves to affirm and validate her personal experience and identity. It also has facilitated processing of the traumatic bereavement. Sheila described that: "there's things I've written about that sort of capture the essence of how – how I sort of see it [her mother's death] as being okay" (75). She described these creative activities:

> There's a bunch of things, these mechanisms that have been put into place since my mom past away. Like journaling, diarying – I diary every single dream. I write letters to her, I draw pictures, I write songs. I like draw my emotions, I draw me. There's all these things, these sort of creative outlets, which are so useful and so individual (123).

While Sheila perceives her creative expression to have been an area of growth that was instigated by her mother's death, there is one caveat. Sheila points out that while her creative endeavours were intensified and varied after her mother died, there is a specific instance of creative expression that has been blocked. She explained that as a child she would sketch a tree when she missed her mother, but that since her mother died, she has not been able to draw a tree as skillfully:

> I haven't been able to draw a tree as well as I used to in primary school. Um I think I had a – that's quite interesting, maybe I should try drawing a tree (laugh). But ja, the journaling and the creative stuff has been so amazing, like I flip back and I'm like, 'wow, I can remember everything' (127).

Elsewhere in the interview, Sheila links the symbol of a tree as representing her mother, saying: "The trees to me are um my god, kind of in a way. Well, they're personification,

well everything's personification of God but like...no I think trees are my mom actually (laughs)" (60). In linking trees with her mother, it suggests that not being able to draw a tree as accurately may reflect the sense of her mother's absence. Despite this exception, Sheila feels that the creative expression generated by her mother's death is one of meaningful growth.

Having described Sheila's posttraumatic growth in the area of self-perception, posttraumatic growth in the domain of relationships will now be presented.

4.2.2 *Changes to the Interpersonal Domain*

Unlike the other domains in which Sheila reports growth, in the interpersonal domain, Sheila described both positive and negative effects of the traumatic bereavement. Although the present study is specifically interested in growth, the researcher felt that it would be more accurate to present interpersonal growth alongside the negative effects. This is because in this instance, positive and negative effects are so closely intertwined. Sheila refers to the impact of the traumatic bereavement on relationships as being a "double-edged sword" (205). This demonstrates how growth can occur in the context of both positive and negative changes.

4.2.2.1 *Relationships as a Double-edged Sword*

Sheila described disappointment at the times when she does not receive adequate social support. She takes partial responsibility for this dissatisfaction, expressing that due to her mother's death, she has held expectations of others that may be unreasonable. However, she expressed that this also has a positive side, as it has allowed her to understand and support others in need. She described how her mother's death has led to prioritising relationships more highly, and that this has had mixed effects:

> Building other ones [relationships] and needing other ones more. And that's – that's like a double-edged sword because it puts a lot of pressure on my relationships, but at the same time, well, because of my expectations, my needs. At the same time those expectations are valid and it's what's going to be occurring with other people that I'm going to be working with at some point of my career (205).

When asked to elaborate about the other side of the "double-edged sword", Sheila replied that it:

> Is knowing what other people expect of me, as extreme as my expectations might have been or might be because of my loss, sort of post-loss expectations (laughing). I can sort of have insight into other people's expectations, not only of me but of other people when they are going through similar things. Or just sort of generally, even just like basics, you know, need for comfort or nurturance (207).

Having pointed out that the traumatic bereavement had both a negative and positive impact on Sheila's relationships, a deeper exploration of posttraumatic growth in this interpersonal domain will now be presented.

4.2.2.2 *Posttraumatic Growth in the Interpersonal Domain*

Although Sheila described having a caring and sensitive nature prior to the loss, her experience of bereavement has led to posttraumatic growth in the area of relating to others. In particular, struggling to cope with her mother's death has enhanced her desire and ability to help others. This entails three aspects: Firstly, Sheila's experience of loss has led to a profound sense of connectedness to others who have also suffered a loss. She feels she is able to understand others in mourning to an extent that she would not have otherwise, and this provides Sheila with an ability to comfort them in their distress. Secondly, the struggle with traumatic bereavement has taught her much about healing and coping. While these lessons have been painful to learn, she desires to use the knowledge she has gained to facilitate others' healing processes. Thirdly, Sheila's struggle with her mother's death has played a key role in forming Sheila's passion to help others through wilderness therapy.

4.2.2.2.1 Increased Connection to Others Who Have Suffered a Loss: Being Able to Understand and Support

Sheila's traumatic bereavement has enabled her to experience a deep connection to – and an increased understanding for – others who have suffered a loss. She stated that "people who haven't lost a parent just – I don't know – I just – I just don't feel like they understand at all" (75). Furthermore, she claimed: "So it does feel like I have a special link to other

people who have a special sadness" (77). Having a deeper awareness of other people's loss-related needs makes Sheila want to reach out and attend to them, and allows her to provide emotional support more effectively:

> It means that I have a whole other repertoire of responses for those people. Like the experiences I've had in my life, with just friends and stuff – just anyone really, I can see what they need and then I can sort of validate what they're needing kind of thing. And it's cool, whatever they're feeling (209).

While Sheila finds helping others rewarding as it evokes a sense of human connectedness, it also allows her to vicariously or indirectly nurture herself: "And also because in a way it comforts me to comfort somebody else. It's a really nice feeling actually" (83).

Sheila offers several examples since her mother's death of being able to reach out to others who had suffered a loss. These opportunities were experienced as highly rewarding and meaningful. Sheila explained that in the last few years, three of her friends had experienced the death of a parent, and that they had reached out to her for support. She identified that she was able to help by simply providing an empathic presence, sharing her own story of loss and listening to theirs: "And like I'd just go be with them, none of them sort of therapeutically, but just like say, 'this is how it was for me, how is it for you?' type thing. Just such a hectic connection" (76).

In another example, Sheila described what she called "a beautiful experience" (60) that she had with a boy at one of the children's camps she worked at. This child had been orphaned by AIDS, and he was talking to her about his feelings of sorrow and isolation. She had responded by disclosing her own bereavement experience to him which had had a comforting effect. Their many differences in terms of language, age and background were bridged by their shared experience of loss, with the effect that this child felt understood and supported. She described the encounter:

> And he was like, "I don't know, like the shelter's ok," but his mom and his dad are dead and he's just sad about that. And when he sees his brother that's a good thing, but he misses his mom. And I was like, "My mom died as well". And he was like, "*Really*?" And like he was just – for some reason – I mean obviously, he just – he like...It was the weirdest thing because he was like just okay. Because if it happened to me, and I was there, and we were both at xxx (the outdoor camp), and I was so

> different from him. And um like... He was such a mixed combination of relief and companionship (76).

4.2.2.2.2 Wanting to Share the Lessons Learnt

Upon reflecting back on the difficult road she has walked since her mother's death, Sheila has a sense that she has learnt to cope and to process her pain in a healthy way. She feels that learning how to deal with loss was something she had to figure out on her own since she did not receive adequate support. While she feels proud of having been able to cope on her own, she desires to help others in distress by sharing the knowledge and skills that she has gleaned through her own struggle: "And like I wish I'd had help, but I didn't, which makes me a little bit more proud. But at the same time, um I want to help other people" (163).

Sheila described the distress of traumatic bereavement as being engulfing at times. She has found that the way to avoid becoming mired in it is to attempt to attain a sense of meaning in the experience. Sheila desires to apply this understanding to facilitate healing in others through:

> Giving access to people to ways – ways of understanding, ways of giving meaning to experiences so that they don't become like a swamp. It just drowns you and stuff, 'cause it can feel like that (80).

Personal experience has also taught Sheila that while it may take time before a person is able to face the pain of loss, acknowledging and expressing the pain is a necessary part of healing. Again, this is an insight that she wishes to use to help others:

> Like also helping other people to experience that, because as comfortable as not feeling is, it's just kind of prolonging the inevitable. So, ja, and the longer I think one prolongs that, the worse it is (117).

4.2.2.2.3 Wilderness Therapy

Struggling with traumatic bereavement has led Sheila to pursue a career in wilderness therapy. Through attempting to find meaning in the loss of her mother, Sheila became more committed firstly to exploring the psychological well-being of herself and others, and secondly to taking a stance in caring for the environment. These two values have become jointly encapsulated in her passion to pursue a career in wilderness therapy. What

follows is a brief illumination of how her experience of bereavement has led Sheila to study psychology, and also how it has led to a strengthening of her environmental values. Thereafter, a discussion of her passion for wilderness therapy as posttraumatic growth will follow.

Sheila feels that her struggle with traumatic bereavement was probably that catalyst that led to her pursuing a psychology degree. Prior to this, she had wanted to study law: "I wanted to be a prosecutor. And then I changed, I think I got more sensitive and stuff" (275). Studying psychology has validated her personal experience and increased self-awareness. This, in turn, instilled in her a desire to extend this towards helping others:

> But I think I would probably say that because of the trauma I wanted to explore my own psychology which led me to [want to] be a therapist. And as I explore my own psychology I realised that I can do the same for other people (276).

Sheila described her mother as having been involved in environmental concerns, and that she had instilled these environmental values in Sheila before she died. These values lay dormant in Sheila for several years after her mother's death. Following a peak experience in the forest five years ago (See section 5.3), these values began to be re-awakened. The following comment reflects this renewed environmental responsibility:

> Because she died when I was 13, like my whole environmental responsibility disappeared for while I was a teenager. Like I'd never litter but I didn't do anything and I think that's one of the main things that I would've – I would've been more involved in like the community and stuff if she had been alive. Um but just recently – since, like about 7 years after her death, about 5 years ago I started realising that what she had instilled in us about the environment, was that it'd come back (13).

Since caring for the environment was something that Sheila shared with her mother before she died, it became all the more precious to her thereafter, and she nurtured it further:

> And what I did have of her I built on specifically and I got like proficient in them more. And my interest in it flowered hugely over the past five or six years. Ja, like learning about the plants and identifying trees and birds and stuff, which is ja, very useful! (220).

Sheila described nature as the vehicle through which she perceives a sense of connection to her mother. In trying to find meaning after her mother's death, Sheila began to consider

the spiritual realm (See section 5.4). The sacredness of nature is a central aspect of the belief system than Sheila constructed subsequent to her mother's death. Therefore when Sheila's environmental responsibility returned, it was infused with heightened meaning as a result of her struggle with traumatic bereavement. Sheila described nature as "an embodiment of my relationship with my mom. What it was and what it became and um hopefully what it will become, because like it changes and it grows just like daughters. (52). To Sheila, nature represents both a sense of connection to her mother as well as a cause to fight for, as is demonstrated in the following comment:

> But it's sad because like – like when I see trees cut down it's like how my mom was taken too early. And it makes me so angry and so sad and it's so unnecessary. I know that like on an emotional level it's – it's because I identify those trees with my mom. And um – but on a – on a sort of moral level I know also it's so wrong because it is, you know. And uh that's also given me the strength to want to fight it. Ja, hugely. Like that's why I want to go into wilderness therapy (52).

Coping with traumatic bereavement led Sheila to enroll in a psychology degree, and also to increase her passion for the environment. These are both instances of posttraumatic growth in their own right, as they reflect positive changes that have emerged as a result of her struggle with traumatic bereavement. Involvement with psychology as well as environmental passion culminate into a third aspect of posttraumatic growth, that of Sheila's pursuit of a career in wilderness therapy. In the following comment, Sheila linked her passion for wilderness therapy to her bereavement experience as well as to the peak experience. As will be explained in section 4.2.3, the meaning of this peak experience was strongly related to a sense of connection to her mother. Therefore wilderness therapy can be conceptualised as growth that follows from her traumatic bereavement:

> I think that my approach to therapy and wilderness therapy in particular is directly from that experience – the peak experience and the experience of my mom's death. A mixture of those two things. Um I think my work definitely, my work and my career is influenced by it. Um and it – ja, the insights I feel I have because of that, definitely (218).

The meaning of wilderness therapy to Sheila involves honouring what she gained from her mother's life. She expressed in the following comment that these gains are kept alive through being able to pass them on to others:

> Like so that other people can have the kind of experiences that I had, or maybe, you know if that happens that would be cool. Um so ja, to give people access to that just like the way my mom gave me access to it (53).

For the past three years, Sheila has been working in outdoor children's camps, which are strides towards fulfilling her dream of being a wilderness therapist. She experiences this work as highly rewarding, and her passion in this area is portrayed in the following comment:

> I don't know if they [the children] understand half the stuff I say, because they're Xhosa, but I think they understand my passion. And like I'll put my hand on a tree and be like, you know...it's like I'm showing off in a way, it's like – it's when I feel I can be most me (93).

Sheila believes that if her mother were still alive she would have shared her resources and helped Sheila to be involved in environmentally-orientated activities. However, the impact of coping with her mother's death has placed in Sheila an increased sensitivity, desire and ability to help vulnerable children through wilderness therapy.

> I would've had access to it [environmental activities] because my mom knew people so on a practical level – but I wouldn't...The way I understand it and the way my mom's death has shaped it is that I might very well have a deeper understanding – maybe just a deeper connection to the children because of what happened (89).

Having presented Sheila's posttraumatic growth in the interpersonal domain, positive changes in the existential domain will now be described.

4.2.3 *Existential Posttraumatic Growth*

Sheila demonstrates existential posttraumatic growth as a result of her experience of traumatic bereavement. Issues such as responsibility, values, choices and meaning are encapsulated in an overarching theme that is Sheila's life purpose. Sheila's struggle with traumatic bereavement has led to the sense that her life is filled with meaningful purpose. What follows next is an exploration of what Sheila referred to as a "peak experience". This experience, which involved perceiving a connection to her mother, plays an important role in the development of Sheila's existential posttraumatic growth. Thereafter, an exploration of Sheila's growth in the form of a deepened sense of purpose will be presented.

4.2.3.1 *Sheila's Peak Experience*

Sheila experienced what she described as a "peak experience" (15) that took place approximately five years ago. She had been walking in the forest on her own, and had gotten lost. She experienced this journey as an existential metaphor: "I realised that the like walk in the forest was the same as the path of my life" (14). She described how she had perceived her mother's presence, and felt that her mother was re-affirming her identity and life purpose. Therefore, this experience emerged out of the context of Sheila's traumatic bereavement. She described this experience:

> I was walking through the xxx forest and that's always been a very special place for our family. We used to go on hikes and stuff. And there was this one particular trail that I was going on and I got lost halfway. Well, I went halfway and then I didn't know – I'd stopped for a picnic – and I didn't know which way was the way back – the way I'd come or the – the continuing path (13).

When asked about what meaning this peak experience held for Sheila, she answered: "Well, her death and my life" (61). This comment reflects the intertwined meaning of both her personal existence as well as meaning related to her mother. Sheila spoke of how she experienced a strong connection to her mother in the forest that day. Having a sense of her mother's guidance served to affirm Sheila's sense of self and of her life being meaningful. In this experience she perceived her mother to be communicating with her, re-affirming her identity: "I felt like my mom was saying, 'remember who you are'. And in that instant I did. Um and she called me a 'rainbow warrior' which was the name of the Green Peace ship" (41).

Sheila spoke of how the peak experience was experienced as a rebirth of self, saying: "I felt so new, like I'd just been born" (44). She uses the metaphor of a lizard "shaking off an old skin" (43) to describe this experience. She adds that this experience was particularly self-affirming because she was in the forest alone: "And it happened alone, that was the other thing, like it was just me. I guess that's uh verifying because it was like – it wasn't because of anyone else that, it was only because of me like" (49).

Through her journey in the forest, Sheila felt confronted with the responsibility to re-evaluate the choices and decisions she had made in her life. She felt challenged to make

sure she was living in accordance with her values, and this prompted her to try to give up smoking. Being aware of a sense of connection to her mother that day motivated her to evaluate her life choices because she felt that she wanted to make her mother proud. This is reflected in the following comment:

> And when I was in the forest like I took out my cigarettes and I – I looked at them and I had the lighter or a box of matches or something, and I just realised that I just I could not possibly have a cigarette in this sacred place. And like...because cigarettes stood for everything that's bad about the human race. It was a very extreme experience. And um so I scrunched up my box of cigarettes and I put them back in my bag and I was like, 'That's it, that's me, like I'm never going to smoke again, this is – you know it's so wrong'. My mom would have been so disappointed in me (14).

This experience led to a clearer perspective of her life as meaningful, and marked a shift in her healing process. Sheila spoke of this experience as a turning point where she was able to start moving towards a purposeful future rather than being mired in the past:

> "And it was incredible because as I was having these experiences I would walk into a clearing, or maybe I just became aware of the clearing. Ja, and the sunlight would come through and the trees were greener and I realised what was yesterday and what was today. You know, like ja. So I stopped living in yesterday" (44).

This sense of direction that she perceived that day in the forest had a lasting effect on her, and motivated her to make positive changes in her life. For example, she decided to leave an abusive relationship despite having been financially dependent: "After that I just – I still – you know, I had a couple of things I had to iron out, because I was still in a bad relationship with a skummy kind of person" (45).

4.2.3.2 *Purpose as Existential Growth*

Sheila believes that one of the outcomes of struggling with her traumatic bereavement was the development of a clear and meaningful life purpose. As she said: "It's cool because um I feel like my purpose is quite defined. There are so many things I could do but the purpose is there, really mean that" (62). Therefore, a clearer sense of purpose represents posttraumatic growth that fits within the broader framework of existential posttraumatic growth. In perceiving a sense of her mother's guiding presence during the peak experience, Sheila's sense of purpose and identity were affirmed. Having a surer sense of who she is is closely tied to knowing her purpose:

> And that's really cool because it adds to my uniqueness, and then that links straight to who I know I am. And who my mom reminded me I was in the forest that day. Um so I suppose, ja, it still links to that: 'I know what I'm here for, I know what my purpose is' (212).

4.2.3.2.1 A Description of Sheila's Sense of Life Purpose

Sheila has a sense that her purpose on earth is that she is called to make a positive contribution to the world, to effect positive change as far as she is able. When asked to try to sum up this purpose, she replied: "Well I'm here to um change the world, or like help change it with everyone else who's trying to change it" (63). In particular, Sheila expressed that she feels called to make a contribution through environmental activism and through becoming a therapist. In perceiving what her purpose is, she has faith that these will come to fruition. For example, Sheila described her dream to orchestrate an environmental protest march.

> Like my ultimate, what I'd really like to do is lead a sort of protest march. And I think I can do it, I just don't know when. Like I really want to do it, but like when I've got enough confidence. I can feel that it's soon, in the next sort of five years. To like really like make a manifesto um for the environment and a South African pledge to look after our resources and how we're going to do that and how we're going to instill that responsibility in the next generation (63).

She believes that because this is something she is meant to do, it will take place: "And like I can see – well I can't exactly see how I'm going to do that but I know it's going to happen. Because that's what I'm supposed to do" (63). Similarly, Sheila described her involvement with outdoor children's camps as something that she is meant to be doing, as if it is a calling or her destiny: "I felt like it was this thing I'd been – that I was supposed to be doing. Ja, I started wondering why haven't I done this before?" (86).

4.2.3.2.2 A Sense of Purpose in Wanting to Honour Her Mother

Sheila's sense of life purpose is enhanced by a perceived sense of connection to her mother after her death. Sheila desires to make her mother proud, and this motivates her to try to live meaningfully. Fulfilling her destiny is also a way of expressing gratitude to her mother, and to honour her. She conveys this sentiment in talking about her above-mentioned goal of organising the protest march: "And I guess I'd do it in her name in a

way, um to sort of say thank you for everything. And so that she can be proud of me, so that she can be proud of herself" (65).

Sheila's mother's untimely death was difficult to accept. Sheila is able to find meaning in her mother's short life by living purposefully. She feels that if she is able to make a meaningful contribution, it demonstrates that what her mother instilled in her before she died was sufficient. Making a difference is therefore seen as passing on what her mother invested in her. Through following her own purpose she validates the meaningfulness of her mother's life. As Sheila puts it, there would be: "meaning in the – in the short life that she did have, meaning enough so that when she died it was kind of okay because she'd put enough in" (72). Sheila's words demonstrate the way in which her commitment to living purposefully enables her to make sense of her mother's death:

> if I live my life the way I'm trying to um with like, it would be like ja, then it [her mother's death] doesn't, it didn't matter. I mean, obviously it does matter but I mean like it wouldn't – it wouldn't be like she died for nothing (65).

Sheila referred to a generational cycle: in following her purpose and reaching her potential, she envisages that she will make herself, her mother, and even her own future children proud. She regarded her mother as a role model, and this causes her to strive to follow suit: "I do want to be proud and for my kids as well too. Like then if I do that... Just like she did, I looked up to everything that she did" (69).

Sheila is still in touch with the pain of missing her mother; however there is comfort to be found in focusing on her own future. The following comment reflects this, as she emphasises that her life has meaning and that she is capable of fulfilling her goals:

> Because I'll never have my mom, so there's – ja, there's a part of me that will always be sad and like a little girl. But there's also a part of me that's like, 'it's okay. You can – you can do anything you want to do'. And that's a big thing. To be – like to have that power feeling of like, 'ja this happened to me. But like who I am... and like I've got a destiny' (11).

Sheila strives to make her decisions and choices in accordance with her sense of identity and purpose. Having a clearer sense of her life direction embeds individual choices and decisions in a broader existential context:

> All I do know is that the right choice is the thing that like what follows on a sense of integrity of who I am and what I'm doing like and my purpose. It sounds kind of like missionary or whatever but like it's not a higher purpose, it's just my purpose (93).

Having described Sheila's posttraumatic growth in the existential domain, Sheila's spiritual posttraumatic growth will now be presented.

4.2.4 *Spiritual Posttraumatic Growth*

Sheila perceives that one of the outcomes of struggling with her mother's death has been spiritual growth. Sheila was not raised according to a particular faith. Prior to her mother's death, she had an elusive sense of the existence of a spiritual realm, yet spiritual considerations were not a high priority. In contrast, Sheila expressed how her mother's death made spiritual concerns considerably more salient. In seeking to maintain a connection with her mother who was no longer present in body, Sheila was motivated to engage in considering spiritual issues such as the existence of an afterlife. This caused the possibility of a spiritual domain to feel more substantial and accessible. Sheila described: "So before my mom passed away I wasn't really anything, I mean I believed that there was something bigger than all of us but then after she died that 'something' became almost tangible, because it held her" (186). She added that the spiritual realm "became more real, well the need arose as well, I suppose" (187).

In struggling to find spiritual meaning after her mother's death, Sheila has been able to develop a personally meaningful and coherent spiritual belief system. Three tenets characterise Sheila's spiritual beliefs, which will be illustrated. Firstly, nature as sacred plays a central role in her spirituality. Sheila expressed these aspects in the following comment:

> The trees to me are um my god, kind of in a way. Well, they're personification, well everything's personification of God but like...no I think trees are my mom actually. Um but the whole environment being God and her going back to God (60).

Secondly, she believes in the spiritual unity and interconnectedness of all life, which she termed "the river of life" (185). Thirdly, Sheila described believing in an afterlife in which the deceased return to this interconnected and universal domain. Sheila believes that her

mother is: "part of everything again, um which ties into my belief structure about um sort of the afterlife being um...uh that we just become part of everything again" (181).

Sheila perceives that her relationship with her mother has been transformed rather than ended. Although she deeply misses her mother's physical presence, Sheila described perceiving an on-going connection with her mother that is experienced through nature: "I suppose that [nature] is a path or a door to experiencing someone who's gone...Well it's mine because we always shared that" (47). Sheila elaborated:

> So we're born out of the oneness and the unity that is – that is most accessible through the wilderness. And then, when we die – or when my mom died, she became part of the earth again. So it's my connection to her and it's only because she's gone that the connection is there (182).

The previously described peak experience also reveals how Sheila perceives nature as being the vehicle through which she feels connected to her mother. Sheila expressed hope that the sense of connection with her mother will be strengthened in the future:

> Like I can imagine what it's going to feel like when I'm thirty, when I'm forty, you know. Just like, maybe I'll be able to communicate better with her. That's going to grow. That's the next kind of development (133).

The domains in which Sheila has experienced posttraumatic growth have been presented. The final section of this results chapter involves describing how Sheila experiences both growth and pain. This is useful in that it enables a more contextualised, realistic perspective of growth to be attained.

4.2.5 The Co-existence of Posttraumatic Growth and Pain

Sheila has experienced posttraumatic growth in various areas of her life. However, it needs to be remembered that this growth co-exists with pain and loss. While Sheila appreciates the positive changes that have emerged, she expressed that it is sometimes difficult to integrate the positive and negative effects of her loss and to experience them simultaneously: "It's so difficult to feel both of them at the same time, like both relieved

and happy that I've still got me and that I'm moving forward, but then also dreadfully sad and angry at the consequences." (190)

Sheila also pointed out that growth, although valuable, can sometimes be paradoxically painful. For example, becoming more self-aware and self-accepting has heightened her understanding of what she has missed out on through her mother's death:

> Now that I've like become more accepting of my needs and where I'm at and who she was. Like in the growth, the – there's been a concomitant realisation of how much I actually [miss her]...which is good developmentally or whatever, psychologically, ja. But it doesn't feel good. It doesn't feel better than before. It actually feels worse. But like being able to acknowledge it was good (187).

4.3 Summary

This chapter began by establishing that Sheila's experience can be defined as traumatic bereavement. This was followed by a presentation of themes. Sheila experiences posttraumatic growth in the domains of self-perception, relating to others, as well as on a broader existential and spiritual level. Within the domain of self-perception, Sheila was found to possess increased self-awareness, coping ability, independence and creative expression. Sheila demonstrated interpersonal posttraumatic growth such as a heightened connection to others who have suffered a loss, the desire to help others through sharing her experience as well as her passion for wilderness therapy. However, Sheila also revealed that the other side of this relational growth included negative or painful effects. Sheila's existential posttraumatic growth was described, demonstrating how she has been able to find meaning in her loss through a deepened sense of purpose. Sheila's spiritual posttraumatic growth was also described. Lastly, the theme of co-existing growth and pain was presented.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The posttraumatic growth themes that were presented in the results chapter will now be discussed. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the validity of Sheila's reports of posttraumatic growth.

5.1 Posttraumatic Growth in the Area of Self-perception

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) claim that positive changes in self-perception are frequently reported in the posttraumatic growth literature. Neimeyer et al. (2002) argue that the death of a loved one is traumatic because it involves the loss of a central figure in the individual's self-narrative, which therefore disrupts the sense of continued identity. In resolving the traumatic bereavement, Sheila has experienced several positive changes pertaining to the way she views her self. Sheila's increased self-worth, self-awareness, ability to cope with pain, independence and creative expression will now be discussed.

5.1.1 *Increased Self-awareness*

It appears that the challenges that the traumatic bereavement confronted Sheila with have ultimately resulted in increased self-awareness. The traumatic bereavement evoked intense emotional distress and challenged her coping resources. This extreme experience forced her to experience herself outside of the routine of everyday life, and broke through her defenses. The penetrative nature of this experience yielded increased self-knowledge. This resonates with the assertion made by Aldwin and Sutton (1998) that the fundamental aspects of the self are so familiar that they are not brought into conscious awareness. They claim that the non-normative nature of trauma may provide the impetus for self-exploration that can lead to increased self-awareness.

As Calhoun and Tedeschi's model (2006) indicates, initial coping is necessary before growth-orientated processing can occur. In response to Sheila's experience of overwhelming distress in the aftermath of her mother's death, it appears that Sheila was compelled to engage in cognitive processing. This is evidenced by the comprehensive

journaling that she engaged in after her mother's death. This journaling involved expressions relating to herself as well as to her thoughts and feelings regarding her mother. It appears that the processing that Sheila engaged in in order to cope with the traumatic bereavement led to her becoming more introspective and therefore having a sense of heightened self-awareness.

Sheila also mentioned that the traumatic bereavement led to the motivation to study psychology. This is interesting, as it suggests that Sheila's heightened self-awareness was not only an unintentional outcome of needing to cope, but that it was also in part a deliberately pursued goal. As an outcome of the traumatic bereavement, the pursuit of psychology then facilitated further self-awareness. This instance raises the possibility that trauma may at times lead to growth through an indirect pathway. While Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) acknowledge the role of sociocultural factors in the development of posttraumatic growth, this understanding could be expanded to include aspects such as psychological discourse.

As a result of active introspection such as through journaling, Sheila came to perceive herself as having attained increased self-awareness. Although self-awareness was a result of the struggle with traumatic bereavement, it was not an immediate outcome. Instead, it seems that the traumatic bereavement was initially experienced as a disruption to Sheila's self-identity. For example, Sheila spoke of losing touch with central aspects of herself such as her environmental values and also that her caring nature only reawakened several years after her mother's death. Five years after her mother's death, during her peak experience in the forest, Sheila described experiencing a re-affirming of her identity, which suggests that this had been something she had lost sight of. Recall that the concept of *peak experience*, as delineated by Maslow (1959), refers to an occasion that is experienced as profoundly impactful and affectively rich. This concept is further discussed in section 5.3 Existential Posttraumatic Growth. The personal insights that emerged were integrated and consolidated into her sense of self as the emotional distress became more manageable.

Sheila's increased self-awareness not only involved getting to know herself better, but involved becoming aware of the ways in which she had been changed as a result of the traumatic bereavement. This process of self-awareness therefore involved meaning reconstruction. Through a process involving cognitive-emotional processing in order to cope with the extreme challenges of the traumatic bereavement, Sheila has been able to reconstruct a clearer sense of who she is. This self-awareness involves a sense of self that can accommodate for the reality of her mother's death.

Neimeyer et al. (2002) emphasises the importance of identity reconstruction in the wake of trauma, as traumatic experiences may pose a significant disruption to the sense of self. Schultz (2000) found that the death of a mother tended to affect the identity development of young women, and that this involved reconstructing certain aspects of the self. Davis et al. (2007) conducted a study on individuals who had been bereaved through a mining accident. This study found that individuals who experienced the incident as negatively impacting on their sense of self were more likely to evince growth in the area of self-perception, such as increased self-knowledge. The above mentioned findings resonate with Sheila's experience. Furthermore, this confirms the claim that posttraumatic growth arises as a result of the struggle with trauma rather than as a direct result of the trauma itself (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

6.1.2 *Increased Sense of Self-worth*

Sheila perceives that the experience of traumatic bereavement has ultimately led to an increased sense of self-worth. Increased self-esteem and self-worth as a result of experiencing bereavement has been found in other studies (e.g. Cadell, 2007; Richards, 2001).

In the aftermath of the traumatic bereavement, Sheila perceived herself as a victim. The effect of the trauma was a disruption to her sense of personal agency in the world. Through learning to cope with this experience, Sheila perceives that she has accomplished something of which she can be proud. She is now able to experience herself as an

empowered survivor. This evokes a sense of having increased self-worth. Knowing that she has successfully endured intense hardship has increased her sense of self-worth, and therefore it can be considered as posttraumatic growth within the domain of self-perception.

Sheila expressed that in the latter part of coping with the traumatic bereavement, she has come to be able to accept her vulnerability. She perceives that she is enriched by this, and has a sense of being more complete, which positively impacts on her sense of self-worth. Having endured this extreme experience has led to a sense of being set apart from others who have not had such experiences. This has led to a sense of uniqueness which has contributed towards an increased sense of self-worth.

Posttraumatic growth in the form of increased self-worth sheds light on the current debate as to whether posttraumatic growth reflects an outcome or a coping strategy. While increased self-worth has been an outcome of the struggle with traumatic bereavement, Sheila also described it as being a coping strategy. This is demonstrated in her belief that affirming self-worth helps to cope in times of stress. This supports others who have claimed that posttraumatic growth can constitute both a coping outcome as well as a coping strategy (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Maercker & Zoellner, 2004, as cited in Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b).

5.1.3 *Being Able to Cope with Pain Better*

The experience of traumatic bereavement confronted Sheila with several challenges, such as the need to manage emotional distress as well as to adjust to living without her mother. This struggle has ultimately led to Sheila gaining knowledge and skills pertaining to coping with this experience. She has attained a deeper understanding of pain and is able to respond to it more effectively, which constitutes posttraumatic growth. According to Calhoun and Tedeschi, (1998), wisdom can be defined as the ability to comprehend life's paradoxes both intellectually and emotionally. Sheila demonstrates this paradoxical wisdom in being more accepting of her vulnerability while simultaneously having a deeper

appreciation of her strength. Sheila was made to realise how deeply negative situations can affect her, and she is able to accept her vulnerability by acknowledging that pain is an inevitable part of life. At the same time, Sheila realises that she is strong enough to cope during these times of distress.

This area of growth reflects the pathway to posttraumatic growth that Janoff-Bulman (2004) describes as *strength through suffering*. This aspect of growth has arisen as a direct outcome of having grappled with the challenges posed by the traumatic bereavement, and is not well explained by Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2006) theory of schema change. However, there is another part of this growth area which does involve a degree of schema change. This relates to the confidence that Sheila has in being able to cope with future hardships that may confront her. Having proved that she is able to withstand intense hardships, she no longer fears pain. This demonstrates that she has accommodated the traumatic bereavement in such a way that she is able to acknowledge and accept that pain is an inevitable part of life, and that it is a part of her future. She has also come to view herself as someone who is able to survive great challenges. Therefore, while gaining skills and knowledge occurred as a direct result of the struggle with trauma, this growth area also involves changes to the assumptive world. More specifically, this reflects the concept of *psychological preparedness* which refers to resolving trauma in such a way that enables the survivor to be better equipped to manage future pain (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). This also resonates with the concept of *reconfiguration* (Lepore & Revenson, 2006) in that this form of posttraumatic growth creates resilience in dealing with future adversity. This aspect of Sheila's experience supports other studies that have found that bereavement is associated with a perception of increased strength and confidence with regards to coping with future hardships (Cadell, 2007; Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990; Davis et al., 1998; Davis et al., 2007; Walsh, 2007).

Sheila's increased confidence in facing difficult situations is reflected in her taking the initiative with facilitating a conversation about her mother with her father and sister. While she acknowledges other resources which she has utilised in order to help her get to a point of being able to talk openly about this pain, she expressed that this traumatic experience

provided an opportunity to test and demonstrate her strength. This resonates with posttraumatic growth researchers who call for a more action-orientated conceptualisation of posttraumatic growth (Armour, 2003).

One of the coping strategies that Sheila employs is the use of humour. Cadell (2007) also found that the use of humour has been helpful in transcending the pain of bereavement study. Frankl (1959) refers to humour as one of "the soul's weapons in the fight for self-preservation", saying that it "can afford an aloofness and an ability to rise above any situation" (p. 63).

5.1.4 *Increased Independence and Self-reliance*

Sheila's mother's death confronted her with the need to take on more responsibility. Not only did she have to manage the psychological impact of traumatic bereavement, but on a practical level, she had to take on more tasks than she would otherwise have had to. The model proposed by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) refers to three challenges with which the individual is confronted: the need to manage emotional distress; threats to beliefs and goals; and also disruptions to the individual's narrative. However, Sheila experienced the trauma as providing an additional challenge in having to assume a more responsible role. The posttraumatic growth model does acknowledge social factors as mediating the individual's coping in the aftermath of trauma. However, it does not appear to acknowledge how the trauma itself can have a significant and direct impact on the individual's social context, and that this altered social context can be a source of growth. Managing to complete various practical tasks that she would otherwise not have had to has led to a sense of increased self-reliance and independence, which is something she is proud of.

In the aftermath of the traumatic bereavement, Sheila perceived herself to have been disempowered and overwhelmed. Through managing to accomplish these difficult tasks following her mother's death, Sheila's sense of self-reliance increased over time,

constituting posttraumatic growth. However, it appears that growth in this area of increased self-sufficiency arose more as a result of being forced to take on more responsibility than due to modifications to the assumptive world. The circumstances following Sheila's mother's death demanded that she occupy new roles, and the successful completion of tasks allowed Sheila to experience her strength in this area. The traumatic bereavement therefore provided an opportunity for her to exercise her potential in this way. This resonates with the claim made by Janoff-Bulman (2004) that increased perceptions of personal strength following traumatic experiences can be better understood as a natural outcome of having wrestled with the demands of trauma rather than as a result of schema change.

A perception of being more independent and self-reliant as a result of struggling with bereavement has been noted in other studies (Frantz et al., 1998; Richards, 2001). Participants in a study carried out by Richards (2001) expressed very similar sentiments to Sheila, such as: "I feel I can do anything", "I can count on myself" and "I will hang in there" (p. 187).

5.1.5 *Heightened Creativity*

One result of Sheila's struggle with traumatic bereavement involves becoming more in touch with the creative part of her self, which is a source of personal fulfillment. With regards to the posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), Sheila's creative expression is represented by the functions of cognitive processing and self-disclosure. That Sheila's regular journaling only occurred after her mother's death suggests that this may reflect meaning-making activity.

Sheila's journaling involves grief work, and an important part of the processing therefore involves emotion as well as cognition. Sheila's experience draws attention to the concern that the role of affect in processing is not adequately addressed in the posttraumatic growth model (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b). Sheila's creativity constitutes a novel pursuit which fits under the posttraumatic growth domain of *new possibilities* (Tedeschi & Calhoun,

1996). Sheila's experience raises an interesting point that posttraumatic growth can occur at the level of processing, and not just once processing is complete.

Sheila has clearly expressed that social support was not adequately available following her mother's death. Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) have posited that self-disclosure in the form of writing or talking is an important variable in the development of posttraumatic growth. Since verbal self-disclosure to others was not perceived to be an accessible option, Sheila's journaling played a particularly important role. Sheila's experience is useful in shedding light on the potential for posttraumatic growth to occur in the context of perceived inadequate social support which is mitigated by resources such as creative expression.

This aspect of Sheila's experience resonates with the findings of several studies. Reynolds and Lim (2007) concluded that new creative pursuits – even when motivated by a context of pain, can be experienced as deeply meaningful. Similarly, Walsh (2007) found that bereft individuals engaged in creative expression as a way of coping with the pain of loss. Sheila's creative expression involved maintaining a sense of connection to her mother, for example in writing letters to her. Richards (2001) similarly found that bereft individuals wrote letters and poetry that served as memorial rituals to the deceased.

Having discussed Sheila's posttraumatic growth in the area of self-perception, the discussion now turns to the domain of relating to others.

5.2 Changes to the Interpersonal Domain

5.2.1 *Relationships as a Double-Edged Sword*

The interpersonal domain was unlike the other domains of posttraumatic growth in that Sheila expressed both positive and negative effects of the traumatic bereavement. Therefore, the mixed nature of this theme will be discussed. This theme is interesting in that it sheds light on the complex manifestation of posttraumatic growth.

Sheila expressed that her mother's death has caused her to prioritise relationships with others more highly. This constitutes posttraumatic growth referred to as *appreciation of life* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). However, whereas other studies have considered this prioritising of relationships to be a positive change (Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Davis et al., 1998; Lehman et al., 1993; Richards, 2001), Sheila has described it as a "double-edged sword" (205). While this prioritising has led to several positive changes in her relationships (which will be discussed in the following section), it also causes Sheila to have high expectations and needs of others that are not always fulfilled. Reporting both positive and negative effects of trauma does not undermine the authenticity of growth. Rather, growth is understood to exist in the context of distress (Park & Lechner, 2006). Furthermore, reporting both positive and negative changes has been considered to raise credibility of accounts (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). Sheila's experience of both positive and negative changes in her relationships reminds us that posttraumatic growth may be reflected in partial rather than blanket areas of functioning. This feeds into the contested issue as to the adaptive significance of posttraumatic growth (Pat-Horenczyk & Brom, 2007).

This theme draws attention to the important role of the trauma survivor's social context (Schaefer & Moos, 1998). Cadell and Sullivan (2006) found that bereft participants developed a clearer sense of their relational needs. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006) concluded that bereavement caused individuals to need more support from others. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) acknowledge that the trauma survivor's relational growth can involve the capacity to relate more deeply, and that while this may draw certain relationships closer, it can cause others to drift. If Sheila were to experience higher levels of social support, particularly in the aftermath of her mother's death, it is possible that she may not perceive her relational needs as being too demanding. Having a deepened capacity for intimacy can only be experienced as fulfilling if others that the individual is in relationship with are able to reciprocate. Sheila's experience demonstrates the importance of the mediating role that social support may play in posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

While factors such as adequate social support are assumed to be associated with the development of posttraumatic growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), Sheila has demonstrated that posttraumatic growth can develop in the context of inadequate social support. However, variables such as Sheila's journaling may have mitigated the effects of inadequate support. Furthermore, it is possible that had Sheila experienced higher levels of support, growth would have occurred earlier or to a greater extent.

5.2.2 *Posttraumatic Growth in the Interpersonal Domain*

Although Sheila was a caring child prior to her mother's death, the experience of traumatic bereavement served to further deepen her altruism. Sheila's relational posttraumatic growth is demonstrated in perceiving a heightened attunement with others who have experienced loss; desiring to use her experience of traumatic bereavement to benefit others and by pursuing wilderness therapy. This confirms other studies that have found that bereavement has resulted in a deepened capacity to relate to others with understanding and compassion (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990; Lehman et al., 1993; Oltjenbruns, 1996, as cited in Frantz et al., 2001; Milo, 1997, as cited in Neimeyer et al., 2002).

5.2.2.1 *Increased Connection to Others Who Have Suffered a Loss: Being Able to Understand and Support*

Sheila's experience of traumatic bereavement has enabled her to enjoy a special connection to others who have suffered a loss. Walsh (2007) also concluded that bereft participants reported a unique connection to others in similar circumstances. Tedeschi et al. (1998) refers to the "gift of trauma" (p. 13) as the deep and unique insights that suffering with trauma can yield.

Sheila has a deep understanding for what these individuals are going through and she values the opportunities where she is able to reach out and help. Being able to identify with others who have suffered a loss represents growth that has emerged directly from having experienced this herself. Growth in this instance can be understood as a direct result of exposure to the traumatic bereavement, rather than as a result of schema change.

Sheila expressed that she is able to indirectly nurture herself through attending to others who have suffered a loss. Herman (1997) acknowledges the healing potential that can arise when trauma survivors transform their pain into benefiting others. In light of her experience of insufficient support, being able to support others allows her to reclaim a sense that the world is benevolent. Being able to share her experience with others who understand may enable her to further process her own experience. The posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) has identified sociocultural factors as influencing the development of growth. As Sheila did not have access to empathic others with whom she could share her experience, sharing her experience with others who have subsequently suffered a loss is likely to be experienced as fulfilling. This aspect of growth also demonstrates narrative development, for in sharing her experience with others who can understand, they validate and bear witness to what she has endured.

5.2.2.2 *Wanting to Share the Lessons She Has Learnt*

Through her struggle with traumatic bereavement, Sheila has gained skills and knowledge about coping. While this has been as a direct result of this struggle, Sheila also wants to use these to help others. Wanting to share these insights and skills with others reflects meaning construction and goal-formation, which supports Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2006) model of posttraumatic growth.

Traumatic experiences disrupt the sense that the world is meaningful and benevolent (Janoff-Bulman, 2006). Perceiving her mother's death as a senseless, untimely event is reflected in her anguish at it being "so unnecessary" (52). Sheila has been able to find meaning in her mother's death by transforming it into something that can benefit others. It is possible that an altruistic focus may help Sheila to re-affirm a belief that the world is benevolent and meaningful. Existential philosophers such as Victor Frankl emphasise regaining a sense of meaning by transforming trauma into something purposeful (1959). While Sheila did not receive sufficient social support after her mother's death, she has found meaning in wanting to prevent others from suffering alone as she did. In this way, altruism validates what Sheila has endured. It imbues Sheila's struggle with meaning:

using her experience to help others means that it was not senseless, it was not for nothing (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Tedeschi et al. (1998) claim that many trauma survivors are compelled to use their insights that have emerged as a result of their experience to benefit others who are going through similar hardships. Cadell and Sullivan (2006) found that the altruistic pursuits of individuals who had been bereaved were closely linked to a sense of spiritual connectedness to humanity. Schwartzberg and Janoff-Bulman (1991) documented how some bereft individuals attempted to make sense of their loss by focusing on the meaning that could be found within their own personal growth rather than trying to construct an account of why the tragedy occurred. This resonates with a study by Davis et al. (2007) who found that the participants who had demonstrated posttraumatic growth following the death of a loved one were likely to have shifted away from trying to account for why this had happened towards searching for aspects of this experience that would be personally enriching. These findings reflect Sheila's experience, as her meaning-making process seems to involve shifting from the difficult question of trying to answer why her mother died towards searching for something of value for her personal life's purpose that can come out of it.

5.2.2.3 *Wilderness Therapy*

Wilderness therapy refers to psychotherapeutic interventions that take place in a natural outdoors environment. Primitive survival techniques and nature-based activities – both individual and in groups – are used to develop life skills that can be applied in individuals' lives (Russel & Hendee, 1999). As a passion that has emerged as a result of the traumatic bereavement, wilderness therapy constitutes posttraumatic growth in the domain of *new possibilities* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). This is supported by other studies that found that bereavement experiences motivated individuals to engage in new activities such as volunteer work (Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Wheeler, 2001).

This passion for wilderness therapy encapsulates Sheila's dual values of altruism and environmental responsibility, both of which hold meanings that are related to Sheila's experience of traumatic bereavement. Sheila's interest in psychology was motivated by the desire to increase self-awareness following her mother's death. Interest in psychology also constitutes posttraumatic growth in the domain of *new possibilities* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). As Sheila became able to cope with distress more effectively, she developed the desire to assist others to do the same. Sheila has deepened her commitment to the environment after her mother's death. As environmental values were something that was important to her mother, Sheila has cherished and nurtured this, integrating it into her own value system. In so doing, she maintains a sense of connection to her mother, and also finds a sense of purpose in honouring her mother's life.

The posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) emphasises the importance of disengaging from ambitions and expectations that no longer fit in light of the changes brought about by trauma. This is in order for new, more appropriate goals to be invested in. These new goals and beliefs involve meaning-making that accommodates the trauma, and frequently constitute posttraumatic growth. In light of Sheila's struggle with traumatic bereavement she no longer felt drawn to a career in law. Sheila's pursuit of a career in wilderness therapy constitutes a goal that reflects a powerful form of posttraumatic growth. This ambition enables Sheila to transform the experience of traumatic bereavement into something purposeful that can help others. This has allowed Sheila to find meaning in the traumatic bereavement and also serves to honour her mother.

Having discussed Sheila's posttraumatic growth in the interpersonal domain, existential posttraumatic growth will now be explored.

5.3 Existential Posttraumatic Growth

Sheila's struggle with traumatic bereavement has resulted in posttraumatic growth in the existential domain. Existential meaning can be broadly defined as dealing with "questions of life...and the basic condition of being human" (Albinsson & Strang, 2003, p. 226). Existentialists such as Yalom (1980) and Frankl (1959) emphasise concepts such as

responsibility, choice, freedom, purpose and meaningfulness. Other studies have also found that existential growth can occur as a result of the struggle with bereavement (Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Frantz et al., 1998; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006; Yalom & Lieberman, 1991).

Sheila's heightened sense of life purpose constitutes the most salient aspect of her existential posttraumatic growth. This most closely relates to the posttraumatic growth domain referred to as *appreciation of life* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). However, such growth did not immediately emerge after her mother's death. Instead, the traumatic bereavement initially disrupted Sheila's sense of self and her understandings of her place in the world. This led to a period of time following her mother's death where she felt unable to make decisions that were congruent with a sense of identity. For example, Sheila remained in an abusive relationship for a substantial period of time. Recall Sheila's words:

> And I mean, you see the thing is I was a victim in a way. But I was also...I just didn't have access to different choices, so I didn't have access to myself...and um, ja because I didn't have any support, really (33).

Sheila identifies the peak experience that took place five years after her mother's death as marking a shift in her healing process. The concept of "peak experience" was developed by Maslow (1959), and can be defined as "psychological experiencing surpassing the usual level of intensity, meaning, and richness" (Lanier, Privette, Vodanovich, & Bundrick, 1996, p. 781). These peak experiences are often experienced as highly spiritual, and act as life-defining moments (Lanier et al., 1996). This peak experience emerged out of the context of traumatic bereavement. Richards (2001) also found that the experience of bereavement induced peak experiences, and that these had resulted in meaningful change with regards to perceptions about the self and others. Sheila not only experienced this peak experience as involving meaningful insights, but also as an emotional and even spiritual experience. These aspects are not adequately represented in Calhoun and Tedeschi's (2006) posttraumatic growth model.

Subsequent to this peak experience, Sheila felt a clearer sense of identity and purpose and was able to make better choices. Sheila's regular journaling since her mother's death demonstrates ongoing processing. It seems that the processing Sheila engaged in after her mother's death culminated in the peak experience where several meanings were consciously realised. The posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006) conceptualises two levels of coping necessary for posttraumatic growth: The first involves managing the extreme emotional upheaval in the aftermath of the trauma. In this initial stage, cognitive processing tends to be intrusive and automatic. Once a level of coping has been achieved, secondary cognitive processing is assumed to be more constructive, meaningful and growth-oriented. Sheila's peak experience possibly represents a shift to secondary processing. This involved accommodating the trauma and integrating it into a continuing self-narrative.

Similarly, Yalom and Lieberman (1991) conducted a bereavement study and found that existential growth does not occur as an immediate outcome following the death of a loved one. Rather, they claim that bereavement confronts individuals with existential issues. Growth is dependent upon the individual being open to engage with these considerations. Readiness to do so may take some time.

Sheila feels challenged to make a difference in the world, and has clear ideas about how she intends to do so. Sheila believes that she is destined to fulfill her purpose in life. This sense of purpose guides her decision making and is a source of comfort. Sheila's sense of purpose has been meaningfully constructed in such a way that she perceives it as honouring her mother's life. This has allowed her to find meaning in her mother's death.

Sheila has been able to accommodate the traumatic bereavement in such a way that enables her to experience a sense of meaningful purpose that involves pursuing meaningful goals. Living purposefully is experienced as validating the contribution that her mother made before she died. This enables Sheila to perceive a continued sense of connection to her mother and to honour her. Whereas the traumatic bereavement challenged a perception

of the world as meaningful, existential growth reveals reconstructed meaning. While Sheila perceives her mother's death as senseless, meaning is found in focusing on the meaning that it holds for Sheila's own life. This resonates with studies conducted by Schwartzberg and Janoff-Bulman (1991) and Davis et al. (2007). These studies reported that participants found meaning in their losses through focusing on the value it held for their own personal growth, rather than trying to answer the difficult question of why their loved ones had died. Having a clearer sense of purpose not only enables Sheila to find meaning in her mother's death, but it also serves to strengthen the sense of her own life being meaningful.

Sheila's experience of existential posttraumatic growth has been discussed. This will be followed by an exploration of Sheila's spiritual posttraumatic growth.

5.4 Spiritual Posttraumatic Growth

The experience of bereavement may have variable effects on one's spirituality. While some individuals experience a detachment from former spiritual engagement, others may experience no impact on their spirituality. Still others – as in Sheila's case – experience their spirituality to have been meaningfully deepened by their struggle with trauma (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006). Several studies reported that bereavement had been a catalyst for spiritual growth (Cadell, 2007; Cadell & Sullivan, 2006; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1989-1990, Lehman et al., 1993; Walsh, 2007).

Tedeschi and Calhoun (2006) propose that being confronted with the death of a loved one frequently elicits consideration of spiritual matters, such as a belief in a higher power, an afterlife or fate. Sheila described how a spiritual domain felt much more real after her mother's death. The sudden death of Sheila's mother abruptly imposed a separation which was experienced as traumatic. Making sense of her mother's death involved envisaging her spirit as continuing to exist, and as being in some way accessible to her. This resonates with findings of several other studies. Schwartzberg and Janoff-Bulman (1991) found that 60% of participants developed a new belief in an afterlife subsequent to experiencing the

death of a loved one. In the same way, Frantz et al. (as cited in Frantz et al., 2001) found that bereavement intensified a belief in the existence of an afterlife. Richards (2001) found that bereft participants focused on issues pertaining to an afterlife, and that this involved constructing a comforting explanation for the deceased's whereabouts. These explanations tended to involve situating the deceased as either co-existing with other spirits or God in a spiritual realm, or else becoming immersed into the interconnected life force of the universe. Sheila's conceptualisation of the afterlife resonates with both of the above.

Sheila perceives a continued bond with her mother, and also expressed a desire to increase this connection in the future. An emphasis on a continued sense of connection with the deceased reflects a shift in the current bereavement literature. Whereas traditionally it was deemed important to withdraw emotional energy from the relationship with the deceased, the adaptive value of maintaining a sense of continued yet transformed connection with the deceased is now being acknowledged (Walsh, 2007). Several studies have reported that the bereaved sense an ongoing connection to the deceased (Richards, 2001; Silverman, Nickman, & Worden, 1992; Walsh, 2007). Sheila's experience especially resonates with participants in Richards' (2001) study who claimed that this perceived bond brought comfort and a sense of being guided by the deceased, even years after the death.

Spiritual growth in attaining a clearer belief of an afterlife occurred relatively soon after her mother's death rather than as a result of a lengthy process. Although Sheila did not have clear spiritual beliefs prior to her mother's death, she had a general belief in some form of spiritual existence. This may have provided the latent potential for spiritual growth which was fertilised when the traumatic bereavement made spiritual concerns much more salient. In the aftermath of the traumatic bereavement, perceiving her mother's spirit as continuing to exist was a source of comfort. This aspect of growth suggests that posttraumatic growth can occur relatively soon after the traumatic event, which is contrary to the general proposition of the posttraumatic growth model (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). Davis et al. (2007) points out that the highly varied time duration associated with posttraumatic growth suggests that posttraumatic growth may be representing numerous pathways.

While Sheila came to acknowledge a spiritual realm shortly after her mother's death, it is likely that the elaboration of her spiritual beliefs into a coherently integrated belief system was a more lengthy process that involved sustained cognitive engagement. It is possible to speculate that Sheila's mother's environmental values and Sheila's own renewed commitment to environmental responsibility influenced the development of a spiritual belief system that emphasises nature as sacred. Sheila has developed a coherent spiritual framework in which she can conceive of her mother's continued spiritual existence. This has been a source of comfort, and has allowed her to accommodate the traumatic bereavement.

While increased spirituality helped Sheila to cope in the aftermath of traumatic bereavement, more than a decade later, these spiritual beliefs still serve as a guiding life-orientation. This resonates with Richards' (2001) study whereby spiritual beliefs were found to be coping-orientated in the period following the death, but was more growth-orientated years later. These findings suggest that spiritual posttraumatic growth may involve a coping strategy at first, which paves the way for later spiritual growth that constitutes an outcome of the coping process. This supports claims that posttraumatic growth can constitute both a coping strategy as well as coping outcome (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004).

Having discussed the different domains in which Sheila experiences posttraumatic growth, the discussion will now address the meta-theme of growth in the context of distress.

5.5 The Co-existence of Posttraumatic Growth and Pain

The experience of growth occurring in the context of distress as well as other negative effects of trauma is acknowledged within the posttraumatic growth literature (Cadell, 2007; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998, 2004; Park & Lechner, 2006). Reporting both positive and negative effects of trauma do not necessarily pose a contradiction. Instead, being able to acknowledge the negative impact of trauma has been identified as a factor that increases

the validity of reports of growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). Sheila expressed that it is sometimes difficult to hold both the positive and negative impact of the traumatic bereavement in mind simultaneously. Janoff-Bulman (2006) captures this sense using a metaphor of a reversible image. Just as it is possible to hold different perspectives of this image at different times, so is it possible to perceive growth and tragedy in the same circumstance.

Sheila also raised an interesting point that psychological growth is sometimes painful in itself, as new insights and awareness can confront the individual with difficult truths. This bears reference to a currently unresolved question in the posttraumatic growth literature, that of the relationship between posttraumatic growth and well-being or adjustment (Pat-Horenczyk & Brom, 2007). From a perspective of well-being that emphasises a lack of distress, this realisation would be construed as problematic. However, from a perspective that values knowledge, this insight would be considered growth although it is painful. Future research should aim towards clarifying definitions of well-being and adjustment in relation to posttraumatic growth (Park, 2004). It has also been suggested that initial growth serves as a precursor for subsequent adjustment, and that change takes time to be consolidated (Davis et al., 1998, p. 571). Alternatively, posttraumatic growth and adjustment might reflect independent variables that are not significantly correlated (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

The final area to be discussed in this chapter involves briefly considering the validity of Sheila's growth reports.

5.6 Are Sheila's Reports of Growth Veridical?

One of the currently unresolved issues in the posttraumatic growth literature concerns the validity of self-reported growth. Park and Lechner (2006) point out that qualitative data needs to be interpreted with caution, as participants are aware that the researcher is interested in growth. This carries the potential that participants may overstate perceptions

of growth. Furthermore, there is currently a debate in the posttraumatic growth literature concerning whether perceptions of growth are reflecting actual or illusory growth. Several indications support the veracity of Sheila's reported posttraumatic growth, and these will now be mentioned.

Sheila stated that her perceived changes have been confirmed by others, which is something that has been suggested as increasing validity (Weiss, 2002). Sheila's posttraumatic growth is also evidenced by external behavioural changes which support her growth claims (Rabe et al., 2006). In sharing her story, Sheila described both positive and negative effects of the traumatic bereavement, which has been associated with increased validity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). She also did so in an emotionally present manner, which suggests that she was authentically engaged with the researcher. As opposed to claims that trauma survivors downplay previous functioning in order to perceive positive changes (McFarland & Alvaro, 2000), Sheila took efforts to emphasise strengths that existed prior to her mother's death. For example, although the traumatic bereavement led to interpersonal posttraumatic growth, Sheila also emphasised that she was an empathic person prior to her mother's death.

While it is important to bear these issues in mind, they are of less concern when conducting phenomenological studies (Park & Helgeson, 2006). What is of primary importance is that Sheila perceives and experiences the previously discussed growth themes authentically.

5.7 Summary

This chapter involved a discussion of each of the posttraumatic growth themes that were presented in the results chapter. These pertained to Sheila' posttraumatic growth in self-perception, relationships, and also in the existential and spiritual domain. The co-existence of distress and growth was also discussed. This was followed by a brief exploration of the validity of Sheila's reported growth. The meaning of each theme was

explored in conjunction with the relevant literature. Although the posttraumatic growth model was useful as a general framework, the researcher found that it could not fully account for every aspect of growth. This model therefore warrants further refinement.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This study is an idiographic exploration of the experience of posttraumatic growth in the context of traumatic bereavement. This chapter will begin by presenting an overview of the main findings that emerged in this study. This involves summarising Sheila's growth themes as well as reviewing the main implications that this study has for the current understandings of the phenomenon of posttraumatic growth. This chapter will conclude by discussing the contributions as well as limitations of this study.

6.1 Summary of Main Findings

Sheila demonstrates that she has attained posttraumatic growth as a result of her struggle with traumatic bereavement, and that this growth has manifested in the area of self-perception, of relating to others, and in a broader existential and spiritual domain. Sheila's experience reflects several pathways to posttraumatic growth. This has illuminated aspects of the extant theoretical and empirical posttraumatic growth literature. An overview of the main findings of this study proceeds as follows: Firstly, findings pertaining to the domains of self-perception, relating to others and the broader existential and spiritual dimensions will be summarised. Secondly, other findings that shed light on current issues and tensions within the posttraumatic growth literature will be reviewed.

6.1.1 *Self-perception*

Sheila's account demonstrates that encountering traumatic bereavement can be experienced as initially disrupting one's sense of identity, but that this can ultimately lead to posttraumatic growth in this area. It has been found that the trauma can provide the impetus for self-exploration, which leads to increased self-awareness. This was facilitated through journaling and through studying psychology. Posttraumatic growth theory may be extended to involve psychological discourse within the variable of sociocultural factors.

Sheila's experience also demonstrates that resolving traumatic bereavement can eventually have a positive impact on one's sense of self-worth. In Sheila's case, this involves three

facets: Firstly, knowing that one has successfully survived intense pain can elicit a sense of achievement. Secondly, successfully integrating one's vulnerability can be experienced as self-enriching. Thirdly, the perception of having endured extreme and unusual experiences can lend itself to a sense of uniqueness.

This study has demonstrated how the experience of traumatic bereavement can eventually lead to the perception of having increased confidence in being able to cope with hardships more effectively. This involves gaining skills and knowledge as a direct result of the struggle with traumatic bereavement. However, it also involves some reconstruction of the assumptive world as the reality of the inevitability of future pain is accommodated. Being more aware of personal vulnerability yet being more accepting of pain can be understood as constituting wisdom (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998).

Sheila's experience has illuminated how the struggle with traumatic bereavement can lead to a sense of increased independence and self-sufficiency. This draws attention to the potential for traumatic events to alter practical circumstances in such a way that roles and responsibilities are re-distributed, and that this can be a source of perceived growth. While social factors are included in the model as a variable that influences growth, the model does not depict how the trauma can have a direct and powerful effect on the individual's social context, which can lead to growth.

This study has shown how the struggle with traumatic bereavement can cause the individual to engage in processing through creative expression, and that connecting with one's creativity can be a source of personal enrichment. This example of growth also demonstrates how posttraumatic growth can occur at the level of cognitive processing, and not only once processing is complete, as the posttraumatic growth model seems to suggest. Furthermore, this study highlights the adaptive role that private expression through journaling can occupy, particularly in cases where adequate social support is not available.

6.1.2 *Relating to Others*

Sheila's experience has demonstrated how the struggle with traumatic bereavement can lead to posttraumatic growth in the area of relating to others. This experience can lead to re-evaluating relationships as a higher priority and also has implications for increased altruism. In Sheila's case, this resulted in the perception of having a special connection to others who are faced with loss. This is associated with an increased ability to understand and offer support, particularly to individuals who have endured similar experiences. This appears to play a positive role in Sheila's own healing process. This study also illuminates the role that altruism can play in meaning-making in the wake of traumatic bereavement. Transforming traumatic experiences into something that has value for others validates what the survivor has gone through, and infuses it with a sense of meaning and purpose. These altruistic pursuits can also represent investment in new goals in light of the traumatic experience. In Sheila's case, for example, this took the form of pursuing a career in wilderness therapy. In the context of bereavement, these new goals can also occupy the powerful function of honouring the deceased.

6.1.3 *Existential Posttraumatic Growth*

This study has illuminated how the struggle with traumatic bereavement can ultimately lead to posttraumatic growth in the existential domain. In particular, this can involve a clearer sense of purpose. As in Sheila's case, this purpose involves making a contribution to society. An increased perception of purpose is associated with improved decisive-making and a clearer sense of identity, and also appears to provide comfort amidst distress. Sheila's experience also suggests that perceiving purpose following bereavement plays an important role in meaning-making following the death of a loved one, in that this purpose can involve honouring the deceased. A commitment to living purposefully can therefore imbue both the life of the trauma survivor, as well as the life of the deceased with meaning. Sheila's peak experience, which involved sensing her mother's presence as re-affirming her identity, is implicated in the development of existential posttraumatic growth. Further investigation on the potential for traumatic experiences to lead to

perceived peak experiences may be warranted, as well as on peak experiences as a variable that mediates the development of posttraumatic growth.

6.1.4 *Spiritual Posttraumatic Growth*

This study has shown how the experience of traumatic bereavement may have implications for the development of spiritual posttraumatic growth. According to Sheila's experience, the death of a loved one can lead to a firmer belief in the existence of a spiritual dimension and of an afterlife. This was found to occur shortly after the death, and was understood to play a role in coping with the distress of separation. It also provided a framework that facilitated sense-making. While focusing on spiritual concerns facilitated coping in the aftermath of trauma, spirituality remained central to Sheila more than a decade after the loss. This aspect of growth is therefore an example of how posttraumatic growth can be conceptualised as both a coping strategy as well as an outcome of coping, as Calhoun and Tedeschi (2004) have suggested. This study also revealed how the perception of a continuing yet transformed connection to the deceased can be a source of comfort in the context of bereavement. This last point is noteworthy in that it supports a recent trend in bereavement research that acknowledges the adaptive role of maintaining transformed yet continuing ties with the deceased (Walsh, 2007).

6.1.5 *Findings of this Study That Illuminate Other Issues Concerning Posttraumatic Growth*

In addition to the findings mentioned above, this case study has been able to shed some light on several issues and debates within the posttraumatic growth literature. In particular, these are: the relevance of schema change as an explanation of posttraumatic growth development; conceptualising posttraumatic growth as an outcome versus a coping strategy, the relationship between posttraumatic growth and well-being or adjustment; and the role of factors other than cognition in the development of posttraumatic growth. These will now be explicated.

6.1.5.1 *The Usefulness of Schema Change as an Explanation of Growth*

Sheila's experience indicates that the traumatic bereavement did pose a substantial threat to previously held beliefs about the self in the world, and also demonstrates how perceptions of the self as capable and of the world being a meaningful and benevolent place were reconstructed. However, this study found that while schema reconstruction took place, this did not always account for posttraumatic growth. Instead, various pathways to posttraumatic growth have been identified.

For example, perceiving a connection to others who have suffered a loss was a direct result of the struggle with traumatic bereavement, and therefore did not appear to involve any schema change. In contrast, Sheila's perception of being able to cope with pain more effectively involved some degree of schema change. Although skills and knowledge emerged as a direct result of the struggle with traumatic bereavement, Sheila's assumptive world was modified to accommodate the inevitability of future pain occurring (Janoff-Bulman, 2004). On the other hand, developing a clearer sense of purpose appears to be fully accounted for by explanations of schema change as proposed by the posttraumatic growth model. This aspect of growth demonstrates goal disruption that eventually led to the reconstruction of goals and meanings. This served to re-establish a sense that the world is meaningful in a way that allowed the traumatic bereavement to be accommodated. Although the posttraumatic growth model as proposed by Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) provides a general understanding of posttraumatic growth, it has been suggested that it may be more appropriate to investigate separate pathways for distinct aspects of posttraumatic growth (McMillen, 2004).

6.1.5.2 *Posttraumatic Growth: Coping Strategy or Outcome of Coping?*

Posttraumatic growth as constituting a coping strategy or outcome of coping reflects a current debate in the posttraumatic growth literature. In this case, it was found that posttraumatic growth is generally experienced as an outcome of the struggle with traumatic bereavement. However, there were two instances where Sheila experienced growth as both an outcome as well as a coping strategy. This has been demonstrated in the perception of increased self-worth and also in the area of spiritual posttraumatic growth.

This supports claims by others that posttraumatic growth can constitute both outcome and coping strategy (Affleck & Tennen, 1996; Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004; Maercker & Zoellner, 2004, as cited in Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b).

6.1.5.3 *Posttraumatic Growth and Well-being*

Another unresolved issue in the posttraumatic growth literature concerns the adaptive value of posttraumatic growth. Sheila's experience reveals that the relationship between posttraumatic growth and well-being may be complex. For example, Sheila's increased interest in self-awareness has contributed to the attainment of a university degree in psychology. Similarly, being less afraid of pain has enabled her to confront difficulties more assertively. These examples represent how posttraumatic growth may have positive implications on functioning.

However, not only has Sheila's experience supported claims that growth and distress co-exist (Tedeschi et al., 2007), but also that growth can actually be a source of distress. For example, in being more aware of her needs, she is more painfully aware of her mother's absence. Although grieving what has been lost is considered healthy psychologically, it does not correlate with decreased distress, at least for the time being. Furthermore, Sheila spoke of the "double-edged sword" (205) whereby the traumatic bereavement has led her to prioritise relationships more highly. This has also enabled her to be more emotionally open and supportive to others who have suffered a loss, which constitutes posttraumatic growth. On the other hand, Sheila has expressed that when others are not available, this prioritisation of relationships can be problematic. This suggests that posttraumatic growth may have variable adaptive significance, and that positive change may well have a negative counterpart in some instances. Furthermore, this points to the importance of the social context in the development of posttraumatic growth. This context is likely to impact on whether trauma related changes are appraised as adaptive or not.

6.1.5.4 *Non-Cognitive Dimensions in the Development of Posttraumatic Growth*

Sheila described how becoming increasingly confident in handling hardships has culminated in her initiating and facilitating a difficult discussion with her father and her sister. Furthermore, she described how her existential growth led her to make the decision to remove herself from an abusive relationship. In addition, her commitment towards increased self-awareness led her to complete a degree in psychology. The above-mentioned examples illustrate how posttraumatic growth is not just a cognitive engagement, but how it often translates into observable behavioural change. This resonates with posttraumatic growth theorists and researchers who have called for more emphasis on the component of action in conceptualisations of posttraumatic growth (Armour, 2003). In Sheila's journaling, she referred to drawing her emotions. It seems clear that affect played a role in processing the traumatic bereavement. This supports claims that the role of emotion in the development of posttraumatic growth warrants greater attention than it is afforded in the current posttraumatic growth model (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006b). Furthermore, Sheila's peak experience draws attention to the role that positive emotion as well as experiences that are perceived as spiritual can play in posttraumatic growth development.

6.2 Future Research

Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) have suggested that researchers should extend posttraumatic growth studies into multicultural contexts, so as to understand how it manifests in different contexts. The virtual absence of studies on posttraumatic growth in South Africa is conspicuous. This is a gap that warrants further attention, as justified by the high incidence of trauma in South Africa (Edwards, 2005). Further posttraumatic growth studies with other South African population groups, and involving other types of traumatic experiences are warranted.

Although increasingly attracting empirical attention, posttraumatic growth is a relatively new concept that is not yet fully understood. The role of variables in the development of posttraumatic growth needs to be clarified further, as well as a refined understanding of the

varying impact of different types of trauma and different levels of traumatic intensity (Pat-Horenczyk & Brom, 2007). Park and Helgeson (2006) point out that future research should aim to clarify the processes involved in posttraumatic growth, how to differentiate between veridical and illusory reports of growth, and how to most effectively evaluate posttraumatic growth. Although difficult to conduct, longitudinal, prospective studies have been suggested (Westphal & Bonanno, 2007). The adaptive significance of posttraumatic growth needs further clarification (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2004). Similarly, the debate between posttraumatic growth as a coping strategy or an outcome needs to be resolved. The role of other factors besides cognition in the development of posttraumatic growth also warrants further investigation (Pat-Horenczyk & Brom, 2007). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2006) have proposed a general model of posttraumatic growth. While useful, this model does not account for all variations of pathways that could lead to posttraumatic growth. More research into the specific pathways of separate aspects of growth is indicated (McMillen, 2004).

As a result of Sheila's personal posttraumatic growth, she was able to initiate growth in her family. This resonates with Schaefer and Moos' (1998) assertion that trauma can yield growth at the community level, rather than only in individuals. Investigating familial and community posttraumatic growth may be worthwhile.

The present study involved focusing exclusively on positive changes that Sheila experienced as a result of the traumatic bereavement. However, Sheila also mentioned other sources of potential growth, such as maturational processes, positive life experiences, and being in a growth-conducive environment. Psychology-related experiences were also identified as a source of growth, although being drawn to psychology was suggested to have been a consequence of the traumatic bereavement. This last point is interesting in that it raises the potential that trauma may also elicit growth through indirect means. Although this was outside of the range of focus of the present study, future research may investigate sources of growth other than trauma.

While several studies have explored posttraumatic growth subsequent to bereavement, no studies have been found that focus specifically on posttraumatic growth following the death of a parent, in adulthood or adolescence. Furthermore, Sheila's experience has been defined as traumatic bereavement. Most of the studies that investigated posttraumatic growth following bereavement did not address to what extent the bereavement experiences were considered to be traumatic. Although Calhoun and Tedeschi (2001) involve major loss in their understanding of posttraumatic growth, future posttraumatic growth studies should possibly strive to distinguish between traumatic and non-traumatic bereavement experiences.

The application of this phenomenon in clinical settings is an exciting area that deserves attention (Zoellner & Maercker, 2006a). However, this would need to involve caution and sensitivity, and may best be addressed once this phenomenon is more fully understood.

6.3 Limitations of the Present Study

The findings of this study are of limited generalisable value. However, as has been discussed in the methodology chapter, IPA studies emphasise obtaining an in-depth, idiographic understanding of the participant rather than making general truth claims. Having said this, Sheila's experience has illuminated some of the growth possibilities that exist within the experience of traumatic bereavement. Subsequent studies may build on the findings that emerged in the present study, thereby increasing generalisability (Brocki & Wearden, 2006).

The fact that Sheila is a psychology student raises potential implications for the validity of this study. Sapru (1998) conducted a study on the identity formation of Indian psychology students. Sapru (1998) pointed out that the "use of psychological language in the narratives of the subjects posed a methodological problem in the interpretation of these cases because in essence we were analyzing people who in turn were analyzing themselves" (p. 185). Smith and Osborn (2003) have not found this to be problematic, referring to this dynamic as the "double hermeneutic" (p. 51) of IPA research. Sapru (1998) proposed adopting a critical stance towards the psychological terminology that participants used. In the same

way, Sheila used concepts such as "peak experience". In this way, it was important for the researcher to ascertain how this was phenomenologically experienced by Sheila, rather than accepting such terms at face value. Having access to the language of psychological concepts was considered to enable participants to convey their authentic experience more closely (Sapru, 1998). Woodward and Joseph (2003) conducted an IPA study that involved participants who were familiar with psychology, such as through having engaged in personal counselling. They expressed that although it was important to remain aware of possible implications that this might have, they were convinced that participants were authentically engaged with the researcher. In the same way, the researcher experienced Sheila as having participated in an emotionally authentic rather than intellectualised manner. Other indicators that support the validity of Sheila's account have been mentioned (See section 5.6).

Another potential limitation of this study concerns the fact that Sheila's narrative account of posttraumatic growth occurred twelve years after her mother's death. This is similar to an IPA study that assessed posttraumatic growth perceptions in adult survivors of childhood trauma (Woodward & Joseph, 2003). This lengthy duration increases the possibility that "some aspects of growth or meaning-making may have gone unnoticed, attributed to other sources, or forgotten over the course of time" (Davis et al., 2007, p. 709). As Sheila was an adolescent when her mother died, maturational processes would obviously be the source of continued developmental growth. This is why it was crucial that the researcher was careful to only select growth themes that Sheila perceived to be directly attributed to her struggle with traumatic bereavement. Detailed explorations and clarifications during the interviews hopefully mitigated this concern.

However, there are also advantages of having a sizeable duration between traumatic event and reports of growth. This allows potential growth to be fully developed before being assessed, which yields a more complete perspective of growth. Sheila experienced an acceleration of growth that only began five years after her mother's death. This points to the value of allowing sufficient time to pass before assessing posttraumatic growth.

However, longitudinal, prospective studies would be most able to capture a comprehensive perspective of growth development.

6.4 Contributions of this Study

The concept of posttraumatic growth has received minimal empirical attention in South Africa. This study has therefore made a small contribution towards addressing this gap. This study has contributed to the extant literature by capturing an in-depth, nuanced understanding of posttraumatic growth as it is experienced in one individual's encounter with traumatic bereavement. Bereavement studies involving university students have been identified as a gap in the literature (Mathews & Servaty-Seib, 2007), which this study has contributed toward. The IPA approach used in this study has made it possible to explore the complex interplay of different growth aspects as it manifests in the lived experience of one individual. Although IPA studies need not draw on specific theory, the findings in the study have been used to shed light on several aspects of theoretical understandings of posttraumatic growth. This contributes towards developing a more refined and complex understanding of this phenomenon. Further studies will be able to gauge to what extent the meanings captured in this study compare and contrast to those found in other contexts.

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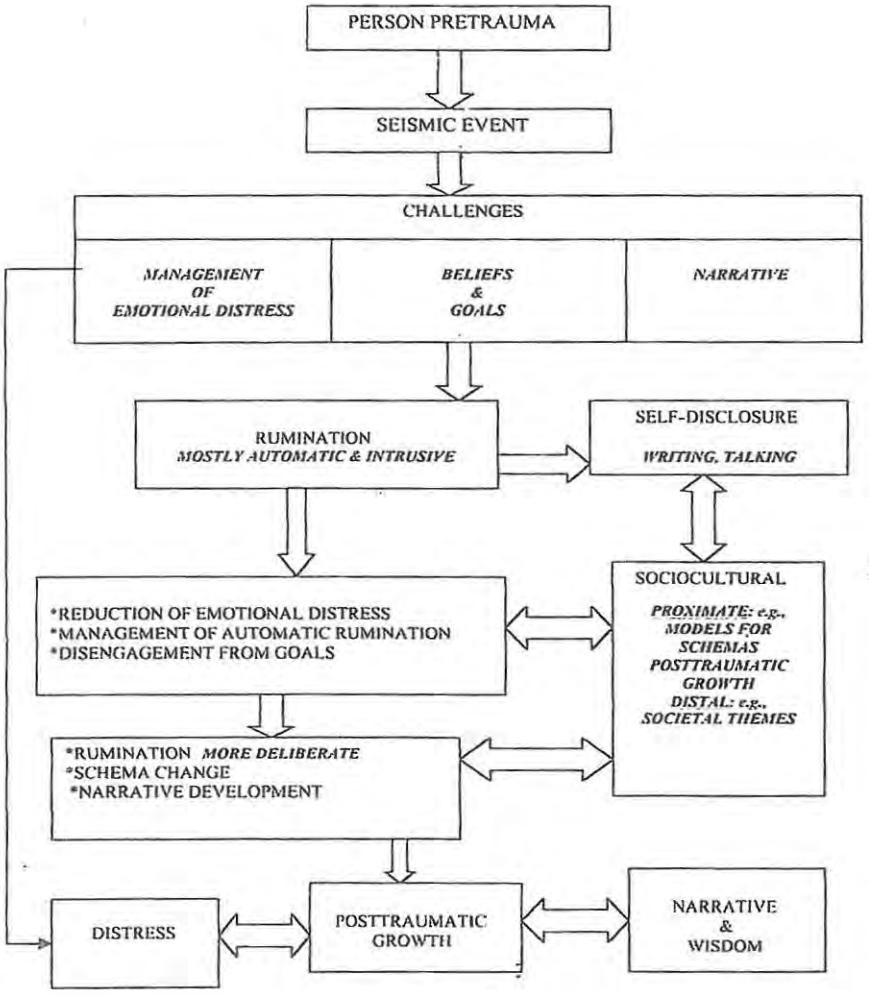
APPENDIX

Appendix A: Posttraumatic Growth Model



Appendix B: Consent to Audiotape

Rhodes University – Department of Psychology

USE OF TAPE RECORDINGS FOR RESEARCH PURPOSES

PERMISSION AND RELEASE FORM

Participant name & contacts (address, phone etc)	
Name of researcher & level of research (Honours/Masters/PhD)	Kerry Acheson Masters
Brief title of project	Experiences of Posttraumatic Growth
Supervisor	

Declaration

(Please initial/tick blocks next to the relevant statements)

1.	*The nature of the research and the nature of my participation have been explained to me*	verbally	✓
		in writing	
2.	*I agree to be interviewed and to allow tape-recordings to be made of the interviews*	audiotape	✓
		videotape	
3.	*I agree to take part in and to allow tape-recordings to be made.*	audiotape	✓
		videotape	

4. *The tape recordings may be transcribed*	without conditions	
	only by the researcher	✓
	by one or more nominated third parties:	

5.1 *I have been informed by the researcher that the tape recordings will be erased once the study is complete and the report has been written.*	✓
5.2 *OR I give permission for the tape recordings to be retained after the study and for them to utilised for the following purposes and under the following conditions:*	

Signatures

Signature of participant		*Date*
Witnessed by researcher	[signature]	

Appendix C: General Consent Form

Rhodes University
Department of Psychology

AGREEMENT
Between Student Researcher and Research Participant

I_____agree to participate in the research project of Kerry Acheson on experiences of positive change and growth after trauma.

I understand that:

1. The researcher is a student conducting the research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Counselling Psychology at Rhodes University
2. My participation will involve responding to a maximum of three interviews over the next month which will take about an hour each.
3. I will be asked to answer questions of a personal nature but I can choose not to answer any questions about aspects of my life which I am not willing to disclose.
4. I am aware that talking about difficult experiences may evoke strong emotions, and that counselling at the Counselling Centre can be arranged if necessary.
5. I am invited to voice to the researcher any concerns I have about my participation in this study and to have these addressed as far as reasonably possible.
6. I am free to withdraw from the study at any time- however I commit myself to full participation unless unusual circumstances occur or I have concerns about my participation which I did not originally anticipate.
7. The report may contain information about my personal experience, but that this report will be designed in such a way that it will not be possible to be identified by the general reader.
8. In the case that the participant is under the age of 21, both the participant as well as his/her guardian should sign this agreement to give permission for the participant's involvement.

Date: _____

Guardian (if applicable): _____

Participant: _____

Researcher: _____

Witness: _____

Appendix D: Poster

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH ON GROWTH AFTER TRAUMA

Traumatic experiences such as bereavement, accidents, abuse or dealing with a serious illness can be severely distressing and very difficult to cope with. However, as time goes by, many people find that through struggling to cope with the hardship, the way they see themselves, others or the world has in some way changed for the better. While it is important to acknowledge the very real negative impact of trauma, it is also important to honour the growth and meaning that many trauma survivors experience.

If you experienced trauma six or more months ago and you feel that trying to cope with this has led to some kind of personal growth in any area of your life, and you would like to share your story, I would love to hear from you! Anonymity, and confidentiality is assured, and participation is at all times voluntary.

Kerry Acheson
Intern Psychologist
k_acheson@yahoo.co.uk

Note: if you need help coping with a traumatic experience, the Counselling Centre is available between 8:30am to 5:00pm. Furthermore, the Rhodes Psychological Emergency Line is available after hours on 082 803 0177

Appendix E: Semi-structured Interview Schedule

1. Invite the participant to begin by telling their story of trauma, starting wherever feels best for him/ her.
2. Has this experience caused changes with regards to self-perception?
    a. (prompt: in terms of self's needs, strengths, capacity to cope)
3. Has this experience has led to any changes in relationships with others?
    a. (prompt: friends/ family/ broader society/ professionals in terms of support, closeness, beliefs and feelings towards others)
4. Has this experience led to changes in the way life is approached/ lifestyle?
    a. (prompt: changes, priorities, goals, involvement)
5. Has this experience opened up new possibilities or opportunities?
    a. (prompt: activities, occupations, interests etc)
6. Has this experience impacted on philosophical or spiritual perspectives in any way?
    a. (prompt: belief in a Higher Being, personal beliefs)
7. Invite the participant to add or question anything at this point.

Appendix F: Data Analysis

Initial Comment	Extract
➢ Grateful ➢ Activism as tribute to her mom and to make her proud of herself and Sheila ➢ Forced separation, against their will ➢ If Sheila makes a difference in life, Then her mother didn't die for nothing ➢ Finding meaning in her mother's death makes it bearable. ➢ Carrying the torch	Um I link it [Sheila's passion for environmental activism] to her um. And I guess I'd do it in her name in a way, um to sort of say thank you for everything. And so that she can be proud of me, so that she can be proud of herself. Which I'm sure she is, but I don't know. Sometimes it's weird like – I guess because I didn't want her to leave, I keep thinking that she didn't want to leave. I don't think she wanted to leave. But I think if I did leave things or if I live my life the way I'm trying to um with like, it would be like, ja, then it doesn't – it didn't matter. I mean, obviously it does matter, but I mean, like it wouldn't – it wouldn't be like she died for nothing. Like… ja…

Table 1: Extract From Interview Transcript, Turn Number 65

Initial Comment	Extract	Emergent themes
➢ Grateful ➢ Activism as tribute to her mother and to make her proud of herself and Sheila. ➢ Forced separation, against their will ➢ If Sheila makes a ➢ difference in life, Then her mother didn't die for nothing. ➢ Finding meaning in her mother's death makes it bearable. ➢ Carrying the torch	Um I link it [Sheila's passion for environmental activism] to her um. And I guess I'd do it in her name in a way, um to sort of say thank you for everything. And so that she can be proud of me, so that she can be proud of herself. Which I'm sure she is, but I don't know. Sometimes it's weird like – I guess because I didn't want her to leave, I keep thinking that she didn't want to leave. I don't think she wanted to leave. But I think if I did leave things or if I live my life the way I'm trying to um with like, it would be like, ja, then it doesn't – it didn't matter. I mean, obviously it does matter, but I mean, like it wouldn't – it wouldn't be like she died for nothing. Like… ja…	➢ Honouring her mother: saying thank you ➢ Making her mother proud: of herself and Sheila ➢ Separated against will ➢ Purpose in living for her mother: finding meaning in her death

Table 2: Extract From Interview Transcript, Turn Number 65

List of Superordinate Themes and Their Constituent Emergent Themes

SUPERORDINATE THEMES	TURN #
Severity of trauma	
Shock and disbelief	3
Integrating the experience into her life narrative	4
Remembering how extreme it was	4
Shame	
Shame/ guilt	14
Shame: idea of disappointing mom	14
Shame: trying to identify origins	14
Ashamed of smoking	16
Shame: disappointing mom	18
Shame when not doing the right thing	69
Choices and decision-making	
Decisions and choices	14
Making moral decisions	14
Family not talking or supporting led to bad choices	32
Feeling like a victim: no choice due to not being supported	33
Feeling like a victim: no choice due to not being supported	33
Identity: sense of self guides decision-making	45
Peak experience: New perspective eventually led to leaving a bad relationship	45
Sense of purpose and identity guides decision-making	93
Sense of purpose and identity guides decision-making	93
Coping with pain as a choice	149
Coping: self-awareness and choice	198
Coping: self-awareness and choice	198
Family relating to each other after her mom died: in the aftermath	
Family not talking about the loss	4
Lack of familial support	4
Rituals of remembering	5
Rituals of remembering	5
Family not talking about the loss	5
Dad defends against experiencing emotional pain	6
Dad defends against experiencing emotional pain	6
Conflict with dad	7
At first too painful to talk about mom's death	32
Family not talking or supporting led to bad choices	32
Feeling like a victim: no choice due to not being supported	33
Family needed help to be able to help each other	34

Being able to cope with pain better

Concomitant growth and distress

Creative expression post-loss

Miscellaneous

Novel experience of activities and people: outdoor camp	86
Achievement in overcoming fears: outdoor camp	86
Things can never be the same after mom died	243
Others confirming her changes	255
Sibling affirms her growth	261

Final List of Superordinate Themes

1. Shame
2. Severity of the experience
3. Family relating to each other after mom died: communication and support
4. choices and decision-making
5. Relationships as a double-edged sword
6. Increased connection to others who have suffered a loss: being able to understand and support
7. Wanting to share the lessons she has learnt
8. Wilderness therapy
9. Experiences related to psychology
10. Wilderness therapy
11. Sense of purpose
12. Sheila's peak experience
13. Spiritual growth
14. Independence
15. Maintaining a sense of connection to her mother
16. Self-awareness
17. Self-worth
18. Coping with the pain of loss
19. Being able to cope with pain better
20. Concomitant growth and distress
21. Creative expression post-loss
22. Experiences related to psychology
23. Nature/ Environment
24. Other sources of growth
25. Miscellaneous

Final List of Categorised Superordinate Themes

A. THE EXPERIENCE OF THE TRAUMATIC BEREAVEMENT AND ITS AFTERMATH

- Severity of the experience
- Family relating to each other after mom died: in the aftermath

B. POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH IN THE AREA OF SELF-PERCEPTION

- Independence
- self-awareness
    - Experiences related to psychology
- self-worth
- Creative expression post-loss
- Coping with the pain of loss
    - Being able to cope with pain better
        - Family relating to each other after mom died: more recently

C. CHANGES TO THE INTERPERSONAL DOMAIN

- Relationships as a double-edged sword
- Posttraumatic growth in the interpersonal domain
    - Increased connection to others who have suffered a loss: being able to understand and support
    - Wanting to share the lessons she has learnt
    - Wilderness therapy
        - Nature/ Environment
        - Experiences related to psychology

D. EXISTENTIAL POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH

- Sheila's Peak experience
- Sense of purpose
    - Choices and decision-making
    - Maintaining a sense of connection to her mother

E. SPIRITUAL POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH

- Nature/ Environment
- Maintaining a sense of connection to her mother

F. CONCOMITANT GROWTH AND DISTRESS

Appendix G: Interview Transcripts

Interview 1

1. Sheila: Do you want me to say my name – oh ja.

Researcher: No, that's okay. Ja, so just basically start by telling me your story about the trauma that you've been through, you can start at any point that feels right for you.

2. Sheila: Okay, well, um it was in 1995 so that's 12 years ago. Um my mom was killed in a car accident and I witnessed it, I was in the car behind.

Researcher: Shew.

3. Sheila: And my sister was in the car with my mom and at the. It was, it was sh (short laugh) so extreme! It was like…so beyond anything.

Researcher: Sho.

4. Sheila: It was…it was… ja, like even like now I think about it and it's part of my life. But then it wasn't, it was – it was just happening in front of me. So when um… I remember thinking at the time if my sister was okay, then I'll be okay and she was, she was fine, she didn't have a single bruise on her. Um but my mom was killed instantly and my whole family was there, it was a family outing. So it – it was ironic as well because it was the first time my family was together and um 'cause um we'd just come back from boarding school. So...ja, and so for the first five or ten years after that – ja between 5. Like we just didn't talk, none of us. Not about that. And we didn't go to counselling and that I think is a huge pity but nobody thought about it. And it was weird because my gran is a psychologist. So in those ways I look back and I think that my family could have supported each other better, and especially my um my sister and I. So we were 11 and 13 at the time.

Researcher: And no one was talking about it.

5. Sheila: No, like I mean on her birthday and on the – the anniversary which is the xxx (date of her mother's death) we always lit candles and talked about it but only on those days. It just it wasn't part of the family discourse (short laugh). And um ja that – that makes me angry now, because we should have.

Researcher: And in terms of support.

6. Sheila: Ja, ja, hugely. Um so now that I'm talking about it, I'm making my family talk about it. Which is…which is brave and hard but so important. And I know that like if we can get through this first stage of like sadness, um then we'll all be so much closer,

and we'll be able to talk to her – talk about her more. And it will be like talking to her I suppose because I'll get to hear more about, you know, what she did at varsity… And what was incredible, and what has been amazing is the combination of um my normal counselling sessions, doing psych and having the – this experience has joined itself together into this amazing force of like…like I'm not scared to talk about these things. So I spoke to my dad about it the other day, like my sister was there and I was like…my dad's difficult to talk to 'cause he – I don't know if it's men in general but he intellectualises everything. So like the most unemotional person who pretends to be the most emotional person. Like he thinks he's in touch with his feelings but he's like so, so not. Um…And it was so cool because I felt like I was kind of facilitating like dialogue between us three as family members and as people who had like lost my mom and missed her and knew different parts of her and should *share* these things. And it worked, it was so cool. Like my dad was crying, my sister was crying and like we all were holding hands. And my dad told us the story of how like um how they had met and how my mom had chosen him as being the father of her children…how – how he missed her and… all this stuff that had never happened before.

Researcher: So it was very powerful.

7. Sheila: Ja, ja incredibly. And like when I think about it I'm so proud of myself, because I like I initiated it and I maintained the whole way. Because my dad gets very defensive and like he lashes out, he's got a quick tongue. So at one point he was like, "well you started this" and I was like, "yes! Let's carry on. You know, like I did start this, and I'm willing to explore whatever kind of fears…" Because it did start like sort of on an antagonistic level as it usually does with my dad. You've got to fight through his like sarcasm um…

Researcher: As you say, the defensiveness.

8. Sheila: Ja. So, so like I took ownership of it straight away and said, "Yes." You know I think like – it wasn't premeditated at all. And when I realised that the ball was rolling I realised I had to keep running with it. Um and I did and ja…I'm really proud of myself (laughing).

Researcher: You stayed with that.

9. Sheila: Yes, ja. I didn't shy away from it, I didn't make excuses about, "Well, maybe this wasn't a good idea," because I knew that I was strong enough to handle it. And because I was strong enough I'd be able to…sort of…lead in a way, you know like, ja. So, this is as a consequence of the trauma, you know. It obviously wouldn't have happened if it hadn't happened. Um it's also – It's instilled in me like a sense of – okay I know you don't want me to like lead, like to be, but I'm going to talk about it anyway. But it doesn't matter anyway (laughing). But it has led me to realise that I'm not afraid of being sad. And.

Researcher: Sho.

10. Sheila: Ja. And I know that when I'm sad, I'm sad; but when I'm not sad, I'm not. It's like not to say that it's clear-cut, but I know the difference between not being sad and being sad. And like that has helped me be happy…on like a really functional level. Like – and it's amazing because it's only happened last year and this year.

Researcher: This shift?

11. Sheila: Ja, ja. To be able to say, "this contentment that I'm feeling is not only 'content' it's actually 'happiness'." And there's a difference between them. Because, like, content to me felt like just an absence of sadness, which is just a kind of non-feeling, you know. But non-feeling in a nice way because it wasn't sad. I had been sad for a very long time. And like I felt like such a victim, like hugely – just so subjected to this whole disaster. And I uh – and I still see a part of myself like that. Because I'll never have my mom, so there's – ja, there's a part of me that will always be sad and like a little girl. But there's also a part of me that's like, "it's okay. You can – you can do anything you want to do." And that's a big thing. To be – like to have that power feeling of like: ja, this happened to me, but like who I am… and like I've got a destiny.

Researcher: Sho.

12. Sheila: And like and things that my mom said that like hold true regardless of where I am or what I'm feeling or whatever. Like she…I can't remember if she actually said it or if I just imagined that she said it, but um she – she was big into environmental um activism. And um we – I remember it was so awesome – we had like subscriptions to National Geographic and this um kids' magazine called "Toktokkie" which was all like all about 50/50.

Researcher: I remember that one.

13. Sheila: Ja, and every time it was in the post and it was addressed to me and my sister. So that was like the only post we ever got when we were like 6 years old (laughing) and so she instilled this sort of sense of responsibility for the environment. And – and for a long time after her death, I think for. Because she died when I was thirteen, like my whole environmental responsibility disappeared for while I was a teenager. Like I'd never litter but I didn't do anything and I think that's one of the main things that I would've – I would've been more involved in like the community and stuff if she had been alive. Um but just recently – since, like about 7 years after her death, about 5 years ago I started realising that what she had instilled in us about the environment, was that it'd come back. And um 'cause – mainly, like actually it happened…um uh I don't know if I should say, but um it was like a realisation that happened over a couple of hours. So it was quite extreme…um see I don't know if this is an indightment on like… 'cause I think it's a very – it's a very touchy issue in psychology specifically. But I was – I was high (laughing). And um I had this experience, I was walking through the xxx forest and that's always been a very special place for our family. We used to go on hikes and stuff. And there was this one particular

trail that I was going on and I got lost halfway. Well, I went halfway and then I didn't know – I'd stopped for a picnic – and I didn't know which way was the way back – the way I'd come or the – the continuing path.

Researcher: And you were alone.

14. Sheila: Ja, and so I walked back the way I'd come until I recognised something and realised I was walking back the way I'd come. Um and because...well, no it wasn't because I was high. I think I would have experienced this on a metaphorical level regardless, but I realised that the like walk in the forest was the same as the path of my life. And um I'd made decisions on the path that related to my life as well, like would I stop here? Would I drink this water? Would I pick up this piece of litter? Would I not have a cigarette here? Because I used to smoke. And when I was in the forest like I took out my cigarettes and I – I looked at them and I had the lighter or a box of matches or something, and I just realised that I just I could not *possibly* have a cigarette in this sacred place. And like...because cigarettes stood for *everything* that's bad about the human race. It was a very extreme experience (laughing). And um so I scrunched up my box of cigarettes and I put them back in my bag and I was like, "that's it, that's me, like I'm never going to smoke again, this is – you know it's so wrong." My mom would have been so disappointed in me. And um...(becoming tearful) and like disgusted! That like I suppose relates to a sense of shame um that I have from some other time in my life I think. I don't really have access to why. Yet.

Researcher: The shame?

15. Sheila: Ja, like well I have access to the shame but I don't know why I feel ashamed. Like I suppose maybe it has something to do with primary school, like 'cause I went to a very, very larney school and um my parents had gotten divorced, and we didn't have a lot of money, and a lot of things that used to happen that used to make me very embarrassed. So I suppose it stems from there. But back to the peak experience um.

Researcher: So you were in touch with that shame at that point, um represented in the cigarettes.

16. Sheila: Yes, and only with the cigarettes. Um that's the only time that I really feel like that, is with the cigarettes.

Researcher: So and like you said the cigarettes represent all that is bad in the world.

17. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: So it symbolises that.

18. Sheila: Ja, and it's what my mom fought against. Hugely. Um so when I think of that I feel really bad. It's like...it's really the part of me that I – that I really don't like.

Researcher: This – this –

19. Sheila: – Ja.

Researcher: – part of you that used to smoke?

20. Sheila: Ja like...I think I've lost it (laughing)...Like, ja, but when I...can't – I can't remember what I was going to say. I don't know, I've lost it, lost that trail of thought. I don't know if I wanted to. Um, but yes.

Researcher: That feeling bad about yourself at that point.

21. Sheila: Ja, it was just for an instant and it went away because I decided that – like cigarettes smoking was not me and like I'd used it for peer pressure and during high school and I was going through so much adolescent crap that it was really cool and I might have needed it. And maybe smoking like um... gave me something to hold onto in like a time when there was just nothing.

Researcher: And literally as well.

22. Sheila: Yes! Ja, ja exactly! (laughing) Even now like, now and then um I'll have a cigarette like if I – if I have a fight with somebody. It's so terrible, it's so self – depreciating, like: "Oh, you hate me and I hate you and now I'm going to smoke and hate me more!" kind of thing. It makes absolutely no sense. That's why at this point I'm really working against that. Like – like they say you should substitute like – like – instead of when you would smoke, just like run or you know...just for a little while during the transition period 'cause otherwise you'll (next word is inaudible). So I run now, and I do poi, and I, you know I have a whole bunch of healthy ways of expressing my anger and like dealing with like (next word is inaudible, said laughing) and let go.

Researcher: Ways that aren't self-defeating.

23. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: So this um... working on your relationship with yourself.

24. Sheila: Yes, ja that's what I'm really happy with at the moment. And um I do, I make "I" statements (laughing) which is quite cool. I'm like – and I'm in touch with who I am, what I want, what I feel. What's good, what's not good. Um what makes me happy, what really doesn't make me happy. What I need and what I'm willing to ask for and what I expect from other people. And then also openness to what they expect from me. And um that's also a bit iffy because relationships can be quite hectic, but I'm getting used to saying, "Look, I – I need this from you. Can you do that?" And that's like a big step for me, I'm really happy with that.

Researcher: Sho, sho. And are these new developments?

25. Sheila: Ja, ja all very new, like only the last sort of two years.

Researcher: Right, sho.

26. Sheila: Well, I mean I suppose there's unconscious processes going on before that to get me to this point. But also I've been in an incredibly um growth-inducing environment with people who love me. And um academically my um sense of self-worth has been boosted since I – since I sat down and said, "Actually, I feel like I deserve some A's, so I'm going to study." And um never done that before (laughing). So cool.

Researcher: Sho, sho. So ja a lot of um growth in yourself –

27. Sheila: – Ja.

Researcher: – and over the last two years especially.

28. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: How do you make sense of the time that um –

29. Sheila: – Ja.

Researcher: The time of two years, um, that shift?

30. Sheila: I don't know. Like I think it's a maturity level, and all, like not only experiences I've had subsequent to the trauma, but also my – just the fact that I'm twenty four/ twenty five. Twenty-three was also an incredible year. Um…I just felt like I've had – like I've been able to take control, I wasn't just coasting. Um 'cause ja, I really did just coast for about ten years afterwards.

Researcher: Right. And you link it to um the time period of not talking about…um not – not acknowledging the trauma –

31. Sheila: – Ja.

Researcher: – for ten years or so.

32. Sheila: Ja, ja. I think it would have maybe happened quicker. Maybe…well I don't know about that maybe, I can't really say. But if – I think if – ja, actually. You know, if we had – I think over – I think the first year after she died, it would have been fine to not talk about it. But then like – or like even 6 months… maybe a year because it was very extreme. So like or – I don't think any of us…I know I couldn't talk about it, I just couldn't talk about it. I'd just cry and cry and cry. And my sister would be like, "You know, it happened." You know, like um – but if we'd spoken about it, for about four or five years afterwards – like consistently, and if we'd gone to family counselling I think I

would've made better choices. Um because there were two years sort or post-adolescence, around – around – between the years of nineteen and twenty-two which were really – I mean – like I…if I'd had the support, I wouldn't have made the bad decisions I made. Um.

Researcher: Sho.

33. Sheila: And I mean, you see the thing is I was a victim in a way. But I was also…I just didn't have access to different choices, so I didn't have access to myself…and um, ja because I didn't have any support, really.

Researcher: It's so important.

34. Sheila: Ja. A family can't support each other if they're all going through the same drama so we should've seen somebody, because it would've been fantastic. And I think all of us would've benefited from it because we'd all have been able to say: "We're all in this together" And not felt so alone. Because we were all "coping", "coping so well" (said sarcastically). Like it was all bullshit

Researcher: A very lonely –

35. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: – time.

36. Sheila: So lonely. Ja, like I remember coming back from school, being fifteen or sixteen, and like my dad would be at work, my sister would go to a friend's house because she practically lived at her friends' houses because like I'm sure home depressed her. Because if my dad wasn't there it was just us. Ja um…no-one, like no-one physically and no-one emotionally, and like it was horrible! That's when I started smoking, because then at least I'd have a cigarette and then I'd like sit in the garden. And it would actually be okay, like and sit under the locot tree. I was so alone, but I had myself and the cigarette helped me connect with myself on like an alone, sort of, you know, basic level.

Researcher: It was very difficult.

37. Sheila: Ja it was horrible! But at the same time it wasn't that bad. You know, there was always good times. Because we had a lot of freedom because my dad wasn't there, he had to work. He chose to work. Um my sister and I were very…Ja, we had some good times because my house was so free. Our friends were always over, and like we'd be quite wild, which was cool (laughing) because like we really experimented with um – with ourselves and experiences and music and (laughing).

Researcher: And, um but – but also quite a silent time for a decade.

38. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: So um when was it that you started to – that you started to shift in acknowledging, ja, the trauma. Is it possible to say?

39. Sheila: Ja, I think there were a couple of sort of um extreme experiences that were catalysts to that. Um in 2001, it was on New Years. That was the – when I had that experience in the forest, so that's (next word is inaudible).

Researcher: And to go back to that experience um it was that – so that I can understand it: it was – it was – it felt like you'd um gone back down the path, almost as if in life you were going back and – and realising um things that you weren't happy with. And quite a pivotal experience. Can you um sum up what that –

40. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: – realisation was, or what the meaning of that experience was?

41. Sheila: It was a…I felt like my mom was saying, "Remember who you are". And in that instant I did. Um and she called me a "rainbow warrior" which was the name of the Green Peace ship. And I realised that my life had too much meaning for me to just sit on the (next word is inaudible, laughing. So I turned around and finished the trail.

Researcher: Sho.

42. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: And as a um, almost as a rite of passage in a way?

43. Sheila: Ja hugely. It was incredible, I felt like I was shaking off an old skin.

Researcher: Sho.

44. Sheila: I felt like a whole new lizard (laughing). Like ja, like so new, I felt so new, like I'd just been born. It was amazing. And it was incredible because as I was having these experiences I would walk into a clearing, or maybe I just became aware of the clearing. Ja, and the sunlight would come through and the trees were greener and I realised what was yesterday and what was today. You know, like ja. So I stopped living in yesterday.

Researcher: And stopped "coasting".

45. Sheila: Ja, ja. Ja I did. After that I just – I still – you know, I had a couple of things I had to iron out, because I was still in a bad relationship with a skummy kind of person. Well, he had probs. Um but soon after that, ja, it was about three months after that I managed to leave him, even though I was financially and socially dependent on him. Um I left him and I packed my stuff and I got a bus. And I'd been with him for two

years so it was quite extreme. It was that – every time I don't know what to do or I'm having a struggle with a decision or I'm feeling ambiguous about something I just always go back to that. And I say – I say to myself, like, you know, "Who am I?" And that's like a link to who I am and I like I always just say, you know, and I just make a decision.

Researcher: And that – that peak experience, um it was so clear who you are –

46. Sheila: – Ja.

Researcher: – and also feeling a sense of connection with your mom at the same time.

47. Sheila: Ja, hugely. Ja, because of the wilderness. I mean, when there was that. I suppose that is a path or a door to experiencing someone who's gone...Well it's mine because we always shared that.

Researcher: Right, ja. And that was um – and you say awakening you again to that kind of environmental values –

48. Sheila: – Yes.

Researcher: – that you shared with her from before.

49. Sheila: Ja, ja. And it happened alone, that was the other thing, like it was just me. I guess that's uh verifying because it was like it wasn't because of anyone else that – it was only because of me like. There wasn't anyone else there so it must have been me (laughing) kinda thing.

Researcher: So quite an existential thing.

50. Sheila: Yes.

Researcher: And, "who am I?"

51. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: And the meaning of the environment um for you based on that link with your mom, what would you say?

52. Sheila: It's – sho. It is an embodiment of my relationship with my mom. What it was and what it became and um hopefully what it will become, because like it changes and it grows just like daughters. And um but it's also very sad – well 'cause it's all-encompassing. Like on an existential level, it is everything. But it's sad because like – like when I see trees cut down it's like how my mom was taken too early. And it makes me so angry and so sad and it's so unnecessary (becoming tearful). I know that like on an emotional level it's – it's because I identify those trees with my mom. And um – but on a – on a sort of moral level I know also it's so wrong because it is, you know. And uh

that's also given me the strength to want to fight it. Ja, hugely. Like that's why I want to go into wilderness therapy. So.

Researcher: Tell me about wilderness therapy, the meaning of that for you.

53. Sheila: Um. Like so that other people can have the kind of experiences that I had, or maybe, you know, if that happens that would be cool. Um so ja, to give people access to that just like the way my mom gave me access to it.

Researcher: Um and access to what, about…

54. Sheila: Oh, to creation (laughing). Ja, it's like, it's all we have, our planet. It's special, and um it helps on so many levels because we can identify with its um its growth and its existence and um like its wondrousness. I think for children, um on whatever level they experience it, uh it can be revisited because it's different from any other experience um. And because it happens in a different environment, you get on a bus and leave. And so this ties in with my research, so some of the things I say are like coming from my heart and others from what I've read.

Researcher: And it can be revisited in the same way that you've had that peak experience that you've been able to come back to and hold onto.

55. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: So it's to almost make that gift available to other people.

56. Sheila: Ja, ja. Ja, definitely.

Researcher: That's special.

57. Sheila: Ja (laughing). It's good.

Researcher: Sho. And it's emotionally very linked to your mom, and your – and the trauma but also her life. Not just her death, her death and her life um. And now it's also a cause –

58. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: – personal but also in a broader sense.

59. Sheila: I guess – I guess, I hadn't thought of it…Like I'd seen the metaphor between it and everything but I hadn't thought of the forest as her life, I'd only sort of seen it as her death in a way.

Researcher: Okay.

60. Sheila: But I mean obviously. Like the um – there was one tree that I saw that was set apart from the rest. And it was (next word is inaudible) – and I guess that must have symbolised her – my um, like her, but like via a…like a – like the Earth's Mother. I think like, it just – I think it's very spiritual as well um. The trees to me are um my god, kind of in a way. Well, they're personification, well everything's personification of God but like…No, I think trees are my mom actually (laughing). Um but the whole environment being God, and her going back to God. But also when the tree's living um. I'm trying – I'm trying to see her life though, see that's still what's difficult for me. 'cause I didn't spend much time with her because I was at boarding school. So I'm still kind of working on that, trying to find out who she was from other people.

Researcher: And the meaning of it has been her death, um not so much her life?

61. Sheila: Ja. Well, her death and my life.

Researcher: Right.

62. Sheila: Ja, ja, my life, definitely my life, very much. Because its path – and the whole forest – was my life, because it was me and everything. But it was, I don't know, it's all mixed up. It's all – no, my life I think and her – like everything that she gave us in her life and afterwards like in dreams and in that experience. Ja, but, ja. It's cool because um I feel like my purpose is quite defined. There are so many things I could do but the purpose is there, really mean that.

Researcher: Can you put words to that purpose?

63. Sheila: Um. Well I'm here to um change the world, or like help change it with everyone else who's trying to change it. Um…to…Like my ultimate, what I'd really like to do is lead a sort of protest march. And I think I can do it, I just don't know when. Like I really want to do it, but like when I've got enough confidence. I can feel that it's soon, in the next sort of five years. To like really like make a manifesto um for the environment and a South African pledge to look after our resources, and how we're going to do that, and how we're going to instil that responsibility in the next generation. And like I can see – well I can't exactly see how I'm going to do that but I know it's going to happen. Because that's what I'm supposed to do. And that's why I'm doing psych and wilderness therapy because it's going to lead me to a place where I'm able to do that, where I've got the kinds of people who will be able to say: "Well, you know, we did a march here at this time, and how we organised it was like this…And these are the people to speak to, and if you want to get high school kids involved, and where you want to do it, and where's going to be most effective…" Like I'd like to either do it in Johannesburg or Durban, Cape Town's like, you know, they've got people doing it already (laughing).

Researcher: Wow, okay – that's very meaningful.

64. Sheila: Ja, ja. Ja.

Researcher: And this purpose of – of um environmental activism, um do you link that to your – your mom's death? Is it from that do you think?

65. Sheila: Um I link it to her um. And I guess I'd do it in her name in a way, um to sort of say thank you for everything. And so that she can be proud of me, so that she can be proud of herself. Which I'm sure she is, but I don't know. Sometimes it's weird like – I guess because I didn't want her to leave, I keep thinking that she didn't want to leave. I don't think she wanted to leave. But I think if I did leave things or if I live my life the way I'm trying to um with like, it would be like, ja, then it doesn't – it didn't matter. I mean, obviously it does matter, but I mean, like it wouldn't – it wouldn't be like she died for nothing. Like… ja…

Researcher: Sho.

66. Sheila: Like if she'd – if she had died and I hadn't done anything, that would have been fine as well. But like if I do, it means that like she did enough while she was here to make a difference. I don't really know what the words are, but I know what it means (laughing). Ja, so that's.

Researcher: Kind of like her legacy?

67. Sheila: Ja. Well, like my legacy, definitely, because I kind of want to be famous (laughing) …

Researcher: Okay?

68. Sheila: But for my own sense of power, because I am human, I'm not like (laughing).

Researcher: Right.

69. Sheila: I do want to be proud, and for my kids as well too. Like then if I do that... Just like she did – I looked up to everything that she did. Like I revered her sense of responsibility, because she was a trade unionist. And like she devoted herself to socialism and workers' rights, which was very big of her, I suppose. Like very – I don't feel that connection like she did to workers. I mean, I think it's good to be a trade unionist but like that's not my calling, it was her calling. But just like she led an example of a socially responsible person doing the right thing – because if we don't do the right thing then like we'll hardly (next word is inaudible). It makes me think if I didn't do the right thing, like the um the brave thing – it makes me want to puke if I don't do that. Because she did it there's no reason why I shouldn't, you know, there's no reason why I can't like, I don't know like, like to make a difference.

Researcher: To make a difference in life, um which is quite – very life-affirming, but also what you said about um – that it wouldn't have been that she died for nothing.

70. Sheila: Ja. Ja, it's exactly that phrase but it doesn't capture it, I don't know how else to say it, but it's exactly that. It's like...I don't really understand it, but ja.

Researcher: Ja, you understand it but it's hard to put words to it.

71. Sheila: Ja (laughing).

Researcher: Um so let's sit with that and see, so it's not enough to say that she didn't die for nothing, but maybe that there was meaning in her death?

72. Sheila: Ja. Or meaning in the – in the short life that she did have, meaning enough so that when she died it was kind of okay because she'd put enough in. Ja, I'm not sure if there are words. I'm sure somebody's written something amazing (laughing). Ja, like in the *Incredible Lightness of Being*...

Researcher: (turned tape over) It's about what best captures it for you, what feels um most accurate for you, ja.

73. Sheila: I've got a journal, and I wrote a few letters to her...(next few words are inaudible).

Researcher: The value that she had on earth needs to be...

74. Sheila: ...like it lives on.

Researcher: Mmm...I don't want to put my words in (laughing).

75. Sheila: (Laughing). Ja. I think I will actually. I think I'll look in the journal because I think, like it doesn't come to mind. But there's – there's things I've written about that sort of capture the essence of how – how I sort of see it as being okay. And it's. What's nice, as well, and hard, ja...Like people who haven't lost a parent just – I don't know – I just – I just don't feel like they understand at all. And what's incredible is that like in the last five to six years, two of my friends lost their dads and a friend of the family lost her mom. And each time they phoned me and said –

Researcher: Mmm.

76. Sheila: And like I'd just go be with them, none of them sort of therapeutically, but just like say, "This is how it was for me, how is it for you?" type thing. Just such a hectic connection. And I remember this one time, I had ah – it was such a beautiful experience. I spoke to this little boy, he'd been orphaned by um his parents with AIDS, and he was in a shelter. He went up to xxx (the outdoor camp) and he was on one of the camps – he like – he was so good at English, and like he'd just gone off sort of away from all the other kids. And um I was just walking next to him, and um it was so incredible, I mean the wisdom of this little child – gee he was only eleven or ten. He was asking me some questions about myself, which is in itself kind of different. And we just got chatting on

such an egalitarian level, it was just amazing. And – it was so weird I'd completely forgotten about it 'til a couple of days ago, or I remember it now and then like spontaneously, just for a sec, and he – I said, "When you go back to the shelter what's there for you?" And he was like, "I don't know, like the shelter's ok," but his mom and his dad are dead and he's just sad about that. And when he sees his brother that's a good thing, but he misses his mom. And I was like, "My mom died as well". And he was like, "*Really*?" And like he was just – for some reason – I mean obviously, he just – he like…It was the weirdest thing because he was like just okay. Because if it happened to me, and I was there, and we were both at xxx (the outdoor camp), and I was so different from him. And um like…He was such a mixed combination of relief and companionship. And then he felt sad for me as well. But like, you know, he was okay at English I suppose, he was good with emotions like.

Researcher: Sho.

77. Sheila: Ja, it was a very amazing moment. So it does feel like I have a special link to other people who have a special sadness.

Researcher: Sho.

78. Sheila: I guess, ja.

Researcher: And in going through that yourself it's given – provided that link.

79. Sheila: Ja, ja. And I want to use it, you know, like because, ja, that's it. Use that I guess.

Researcher: Using that link…

80. Sheila: Ja, like um with – well, any trauma therapy um. Not necessarily sort of self-disclosing, but like just, ja. Giving access to people to ways – ways of understanding, ways of giving meaning to experiences so that they don't become like a swamp. It just drowns you and stuff, 'cause it can feel like that.

Researcher: Mmm, sho.

81. Sheila: Ja…I don't like that feeling. It's – it's tricky because I mean it shouldn't… sometimes if feels that I can fight it and it goes away, and other times I feel I shouldn't have to fight it. So at different times I deal with it differently. But that's what's nice as well, because like I can say, "I can see what's happening. I'm starting to feel this way, like why am I starting to feel like this?" Kind of break it up.

Researcher: Mmm, reminds me of what you said earlier about not being afraid of being sad.

82. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: Which is quite a profound thing to say.

83. Sheila: Ja, ja it's nice... I think it's difficult for other people to be around me sometimes um if I'm sad. So like, so sometimes I pretend not to be sad for other people. Because they would like get tired of me if I was sad all the time. Just like I do share my sadness with people who are close to me um. And I do kind of expect them – not to understand – but just to like be comforting um. And if I don't get that from someone I get kind of frustrated. So that's why I want to be there for other people, you know, because I really can be. Like I, you know. And also because in a way it comforts me to comfort somebody else. It's a really nice feeling actually (laughing)...

Researcher: It sounds like using that pain –

84. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: – in a meaningful way.

85. Sheila: Ja. Ja, 'cause you can't make it go away. And like I don't know how other people deal with it, but ja, it's the way I use it. And it works, it seems to be working. I've been following that sort of path that it's led me to xxx (her current University) so, and to xxx (the outdoor camp). I mean how I heard about xxx (the outdoor camp) was just one of those special things um. I was picking up rubbish at the xxx in the veld because there had just been a fire um and this woman – this old lady in this big hat and like with a rubbish bag, she came climbing up the mountain, and I came climbing down the mountain, and we met halfway. And like I had this scrap piece of plastic bag that I'd been putting stuff in because I didn't go there to pick up rubbish (laughing), I'd gone there for another reason. And when I saw her I was like, "Oh! Thank goodness, hello!" And she was like, "Oh! Excellent!" And she opened her bag and we got chatting and uh she was like, "So if you want to do this a lot there's this place called xxx and um you can do this with children." And I was like, "Ja! That'd be great". And she gave me the number and I phoned them and said, "I want to come help," and: "Ja, ok good". That was in 2005. So xxx (the outdoor camp) has been instrumental, definitely, ja.

Researcher: Sho. Tell me bout that...

86. Sheila: Um the first time I went it was just the most incredible experience, I mean. There's about fifteen, sixteen instructors and a hundred and twenty kids um. The kids are between eight and twelve and the other people I was working with, like sort of my age and a little older, all ranged between twenty-two and thirty-two I'd say, mostly around twenty-two and twenty-five. And um so the people I was working with were just fun and like just jokes all the time, and like the first thing that happened when I got there was there was this um huge apparatus, like nine metres high. And this towering sky frame with ropes that you get attached to, and you have to do like these hair-raising balancing acts. And um one of the things is we climb up the pole and jump off the pole and you have to grab hold of this trapeze thing. And um so every new instructor has to go

and do this. And it's so – like the way it happened was so welcoming, and like: "You can do it, you know!" And so I did it and it was awesome, and everything worked so well. Like I got along with everyone and the children were amazing and um the – the self-disclosures that the kids made were not that hectic. Like it didn't touch me too hectically, I was just like, you know, their friend or whatever. And ja, I felt like it was this thing I'd been – that I was supposed to be doing. Ja, I started wondering: "Why haven't I done this before? Why did it take so long?"

Researcher: Sho.

87. Sheila: It was very cool. So I've been going ever since, I go to about two a year. And sometimes in January, those are the outdoor – those are the underpriviledged children, um which is so rewarding, so cool. So cool. They like just want love, and um...Ja, actually, that's all they want (laughing). So, and it's like I've got plenty of that. And they're scared, and some are brave. And you can just check them, like they going through the same thing, exactly the same thing that I went through: like um being scared to like walk on the bridge or, you know, balance and heights. And once they do it they're just like – you can check that that's like a significant thing. They've accomplished it, it's a challenge, they did it. Ja, it's wonderful. So I want to work with them.

Researcher: Sounds like you've got a lot to give.

88. Sheila: Ja, only because I've learnt so much from it. In the first one I learnt so much, and in the second one I gave so much, oh my gosh. Like I gave so much I was just like so dead afterwards. I was like physically and emotionally drained, I slept for a week and like demanded breakfast in bed. And like ja, it was cool (laughing). Ja. So this is all.... The way I think about it is shaped by my trauma, but not a consequence of it.

Researcher: Help me to understand that?

89. Sheila: I think if my mom had been still alive I still would've been doing these sorts of things. Maybe on a higher level even – like been more involved or um been doing it for longer, or doing it at different places. I would've had access to it because my mom knew people, so on a practical level – but I wouldn't...The way I understand it, and the way my mom's death has shaped it, is that I might very well have a deeper understanding – maybe just a deeper connection to the children because of what happened. Ja.

Researcher: So resource-wise and guidance-wise had she been around there might have been more of this kind of thing, but the trauma of her death has – has brought that sense of intense connection, to the children and to people's pain.

90. Sheila: Ja. And like the fact that I – I led myself to xxx (the outdoor camp) and made the right choices so that I had access to it gives me a sense of like um autonomy and stuff. Like I ...You know, I...Ja, I made it possible.

Researcher: Right. Whereas if she had been around she would've made it easy,

91. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: So being autonomous in not having her.

92. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: So what does that mean in terms of your sense of self?

93. Sheila: I um...Well, it's more than just a sort of rational: "I'm going to take control of my life, I'm going to make the right choices." Like it's a more sort of...It's on a higher – I feel the only way it's maintainable, that I keep thinking that sort of thing. That – that it has this huge sort of existential back up of, "This is your path, like follow your path, stay true to yourself". Because otherwise the choices I'd be faced with would either be different or I'd make the decisions based on sort of a rational like, "If I do this, this might happen but if I do that, that might happen". But that doesn't make sense to me as a person, because I don't know what will happen if I make this choice. All I do know is that the right choice is the thing that like what follows on a sense of integrity of who I am and what I'm doing like, and my purpose. It sounds kind of like missionary or whatever, but like it's not a higher purpose, it's just my purpose. It's quite – it's quite individual but I think if everyone does that you'll have this wonderful conglomerate of people who will possibly (next word is inaudible). Ja. It's with kids as well, some of them you can check they're going to make serious contributions to the community and to South Africa, and um I want to be there so that I can make sure that they, you know, in whatever small way I can, make some small contribution. Like my favourite thing is when you go on that first hike. Because that's when they have lots of energy from the city and kind of stuff, and they're very distracted. And also, it's the one time – because it's the beginning of the camp – what you say to them sinks in. What you say to them on the fifth or sixth day – it's just like an overload of information (laughing). So first hike, we go up this mountain, and what's awesome is you can stop halfway up the mountain. And um the way that the kids are, because there's like a hundred and twenty of them, and to be able to see them and for them to see you, it's best done on this particular mountain. And um we talk about the lichen and the circle of life, and why we need forests, and like we always ask them first, "Why do we need trees?" And: "Oh, for fire" or: "For furniture" (laughing). "Ja, and also to breathe air and that kind of stuff." And it's that whole lecture, and we make it fun. And like interactive – I think – I don't know if they understand half the stuff I say, because they're Xhosa, but I think they understand my passion. And like I'll put my hand on a tree and be like, you know...it's like I'm showing off in a way, it's like – it's when I feel I can be most me.

Researcher: Sho, your passion.

94. Sheila: Ja, and then, so if that's – if they feel that way as well, it means that not only am I right (laughing), like ja, but also that we'll have safer... sort of (next word is inaudible).

Researcher: Okay. Just to backtrack a bit in terms of – and also we have been going on longer than an hour, so if you are feeling tired we can also –

95. Sheila: – No, I'm ok.

Researcher: Okay, well you keep me posted on that.

96. Sheila: Ja, and also if I run out of things to say (laughing).

Researcher: Yes, ja. So awhile ago I was asking about this shift in the last two years to acknowledging – um actually a whole bunch of shifts – that were different um from before, which was the um coasting and um ja. And I asked about that shift and describing...describing that peak experience. Um did you mention that there were others?

97. Sheila: Ja, there was that and then there was um leaving my boyfriend at the time. Like the um (next word is inaudible) – 'cause it was a very... debilitating relationship, very psychologically abusive. And um he was pathologically jealous and he'd cut me off from my friends and family in a very short time, quite considerably. So he had a huge amount of power over me. And it was actually like – practically – I mean, I didn't have my license. I didn't actually have my identity book until – oh ja, that's another thing, that's another thing. Oh I'll get back to that.

Researcher: And was this five years ago?

98. Sheila: No, this was three years ago.

Researcher: Okay.

99. Sheila: So the peak experience happened in 2001...no it was only three – four months between that...No so that was maybe...two, three, four, five, four, three – No think I was with him for longer after the peak experience. Um no, it was a year on either side, so it must have been 2002.

Researcher: Okay.

100. Sheila: So I had the experience in 2002. I left him a year later in 2003, um I came down here in two thousand and...I stayed in xxx for awhile and then came down here in 2005. Um and leaving him was difficult, I had to pretend I was going to a friend's house – well, I went to a friend's house and then I just refused to go home. Difficult...jas it was difficult. So difficult. So it took three or four days to convince him I wasn't coming home. And um, it was very difficult...So um and then, about a year ago, I got my identity book for the first time. 'cause when I – I had difficulty getting it, my – I wasn't registered, the hospital burnt down when I was born and blah blah blah, so there were a number of reasons why it took home affairs seven years to give me an identity book,

(laughing) even though I'm a South African citizen. So that happened about a year ago, ja, a year and a month ago, I got my ID book for the first time. I couldn't drive so I was very dependent on people. That made me crazy um.

Researcher: Gee.

101. Sheila: Ja, it was very difficult (laughing). Um, so ja.

Researcher: And what meaning did that hold for you?

102. Sheila: More identity confirmation, definitely. Like: "You are an adult, here's your little green book. Go out into the world and make some kind of, you know... life, it's your life." Um.

Researcher: Quite life-affirming.

103. Sheila: Ja, hugely. I mean it was crazy how it actually held me back, you know, on a very unconscious level. It wasn't only the – I mean it was what the book represented. And an acknowledgemnt of my adulthood, 'cause I never got that, you know, rites of passage just don't happen enough anymore. And like at the end of matric I'd gone straight into – I worked for a year in xxx, I supported myself. My family left xxx um and moved back to xxx, so I stayed there because I was finished high school, so I wasn't going to come down there. Ja, so it was, it was: "Here you go, you've done whatever it took, and the beaurocracy has rewarded you for your persistence" (laughing). Like so it was nice, it was really nice. Also it felt like – it was like I could rub it in anybody's face, and say, "Look, you know, I got this, I did it myself". Most people, you know, get bored and their parents register them. And they go with mummy and daddy to home affairs and they get it when they're eighteen or sixteen, and then they get their drivers license.

Researcher: It's easy.

104. Sheila: Ja! I had to do everything by myself, like catch taxis – and like combi taxis in xxx to go to home affairs, just for them to tell me that I had the wrong form and that I needed more money and the closest bank was another taxi ride away. And just nonsense like that. So. Ja, just on a sort of coping, functional level, things like that. Now I've got control of my admin, like – like I have admin days, like once a week where I just do admin.

Researcher: And does that um have meaning that is linked to your mom?

105. Sheila: She was good at admin. She didn't – like she didn't have backed up school fees like my dad did. You know, there was always food in the fridge and she hadn't over-budgeted or under-budgeted. And we always got like our birthday presents on the right day. And the thing is, like my dad couldn't cope with all of that stuff, like

being a single parent and stuff. So I think – ja, I identify with my mom in organising things and being responsible.

Researcher: And so having to be autonomous without having her,

106. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: Do you think that's...

107. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: Do you think that's made it a different way– not having her?

108. Sheila: Ja....Ja. I think it's part of that "taking responsibility" thing um. Because ja, I mean, I had to, but I didn't want to (laughing). But I had to, and when you have to do something, you just have to.

Researcher: Having to be more independent.

109. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: Um and – and the conversation you had with your dad and your sister, when was that?

110. Sheila: That was about two weeks ago, actually, ja, just the other day.

Researcher: Wow.

111. Sheila: Ja, quite recent.

Researcher: So it was that and talking to them, and talking to me.

112. Sheila: Yes.

Researcher: – talking to your counsellor and doing psych – you've tied all those together as quite significant shifts now from how it has been.

113. Sheila: Ja, ja....There've been a couple of um – I can't really remember any, but I'm sure there were some sort of brave choices that I made before that (laughing). Actually, I don't know, when I say that (laughing). But ja, I think I had to hit rock bottom before I got up, and then like gotten (next word is inaudible) again. But ja, I was all by myself until...(next few words are inaudible). My relationship with my boyfriend has been instrumental in my self-esteem. Like um, obviously not perfect, and I still have like things that I need from him that he hasn't given me, but it has been incredible. Like he motivates me, and that kind of support has um – has kind of, ja, given me like...motivated me to carry on in the right direction.

Researcher: And you mentioned um – you mentioned being brave a few times, and also being quite independent a few times – or having to be – and that's been hard. But now, like in that – like two weeks ago in that conversation, it was you taking quite an autonomous initiative. And taking a lot of courage.

114. Sheila: Ja, like I didn't even think about how badly – badly it could go. I thought it was helpful you know, so it was all...

Researcher: Ja.

115. Sheila: If um in the future I think I should do something like that, I don't think I would question it. Because if I felt like this then...(next few words are inaudible).

Researcher: Ja, ja, ja. And coping with the trauma – your own coping process, helped take you to a place where you were capable of taking that role?

116. Sheila: Ja, definitely, like on a really authentic level. Like I could really...Like I really know how I feel. Like I – like there aren't, I don't have any barriers to myself.

Researcher: You're in touch.

117. Sheila: Ja, and that – I think that definitely helps in my counselling and stuff. So, ja. Like also helping other people to experience that, because as comfortable as not feeling is, it's just kind of prolonging the inevitable (laughing). So, ja, and the longer I think one prolongs that, the worse it is, and specifically if you've got trauma. I mean I think obviously time is useful, I think everybody needs time. But it becomes – it can become an excuse to like not deal with whatever. Like: "It's been so long," or "it hasn't been long enough" or "I need more time". It's all relative to every – to each person, but I think the way this happened to me, even though it did take ten years to come to some kind of growth point, um like. It's like a seed under the snow. It sits there the whole winter just being a seed and not being eaten (laughing).

Researcher: Sho, sho.

118. Sheila: Ja. Like hibernation. And then, ja, when your hearts strong enough to say, "Okay, I'll open up now to all the hurt and all the pain from – from then". Um and it hasn't changed, I mean, like at all. It's the same hurt, the same pain, and the same feeling of loss and being lost. Um but there's also, I don't know, it doesn't engulf anymore. It's like the snow is still there but the seed has sprouted, so its leaves are strong, it can grow through that. And the snow's going to turn into water, so it still needs that. So it's both. It's nice, I like – I like how I think, I like how I deal with most things like more and more.

Researcher: Sho, that's a very profound metaphor.

119. Sheila: Mmm.

Researcher: Um and it needed – it – it felt necessary to hibernate, because it was not time, just too much winter.

120. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: But there came a turning point, where – 'cause you said something like – "Now I'm open" and almost consciously or deciding like: "Now, this is my approach to dealing with this".

121. Sheila: Ja, ja. And coming – coming to speak to a counsellor has also...Ja (next few words are inaudible). Because like, when I spoke to my counsellor, um she said, "You know, it's clear that you've already sort of embarked on this sort of healing path." And um – and it was so true, so true. It's amazing how you just like trust yourself, and you start doing things the way that would be good for you. And the more you do it, the more other good stuff you do. And the better you treat yourself, and the better you treat people around you, the better – the better they treat you. And there's like this circle of goodness (laughing). Ja it's very cool.

Researcher: Nurturing.

122. Sheila: Yes, ja.

Researcher: And being open and being more – allowing yourself to be more in touch with what's in there so that you can nurture that.

123. Sheila: Ja, ja completely. Ja. It's hard because the little kid inside me is still quite strong, it's like there's a lot of me in this little kid that just wants to cry all the time um. But there is, ja – just, actually – just over the last sort of two or three weeks where the other part of me, the nurturing side of me, has been able to comfort this little child. Um xxx [an honours psychology module] has been the most useful paper I've ever experienced. It like really validated – validated the way I thought um. Through like the process in that therapy, that's how I relate to most people generally. So it didn't make me feel like I was just a crazy analyst, I was actually just born to be some of these things (laughing). Ja, it is hard though because while I'm having all these transformations I've kept a – a dream log – ja. There's a bunch of things, these mechanisms that have been put into place since my mom past away. Like journaling, diarying – I diary every single dream. I write letters to her, I draw pictures, I write songs. I like draw my emotions, I draw me. There's all these things, these sort of creative outlets, which are so useful and so individual. And so, you know, you still feel alone but at least you're like processing.

Researcher: Um how long have you been doing that for?

124. Sheila: Forever, well, no, since my mom past away.

Researcher: So – so one of the outcomes of that trauma was this creativity part of you?

125. Sheila: Ja, like I always drew, I always drew on my own. Like I'd always go into – before my mom passed away. I'd always go out into the bush and um draw a particular tree. And sometimes I would draw the same tree, every day (laughing). I like had one little notebook of the same tree. Um that was before she passed away, I think probably I would do that when I missed her, I suppose. But it was a very – it wasn't a sad missing like it is now.

Researcher: Was that before?

126. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: When you missed her.

127. Sheila: Ja, ja…I haven't been able to draw a tree as well as I used to in primary school. Um I think I had a – that's quite interesting, maybe I should try drawing a tree (laughing). But ja, the journaling and the creative stuff has been so amazing, like I flip back and I'm like, "wow, I can remember everything". And then, ja.

Researcher: Do you think in a way different than if you haven't gone through this?

128. Sheila: Ja, hugely. I can't imagine what…mm ja, I had like a – I still feel like – I still feel I might carry a sort of universal sadness. I don't know if it's an existential thing because I used to – I used to cry for no reason when I was a little kid. Even when things were kind of normal at home and my parents were still together. My mom and dad used to ask me what was wrong and uh ja, my main excuse was, "because I can't fly".

Researcher: Sho.

129. Sheila: And um my mom used to give me lots of books about children who learn how to fly or lose their wings, you know, all sorts of kinds of things. I don't really like that, I think (laughing). I still get sad when I think about that and that – I can't – the only thing I can link that to is a sort of like collective unconscious that I think I've always had – always had contact with. Which is – hasn't been very good because I can't control it, so I like – I'll feel sad about my mom and it'll just burst into sadness for the whole world. So but now I'm starting to differentiate. A little bit, kind of. Well, I can just look at it in different ways, I don't think I can differentiate. But um ja, my creative stuff is definately inspired by the way I see myself. And the way I see myself is completely – it's so influenced by um not having my mom around. I can't imagine having my mom around or how things could have been different in a way because (next word is inaudible). I don't know how useful it would be anyway. Except…um…it just makes me kind of sad and cross when I think of it like that. Because that just reminds me that like she's not going to see me get married and all that stuff. Which is…

Researcher: Sad.

130. Sheila: Ja, it's so sad! It's so crap, um but it's never going to go away. Um but in a way, I was talking to someone earlier who said: "Maybe, she – I think she knows that you're doing what you're doing, and she's proud of you and stuff". But it's not the same. (Next few words are inaudible, laughing).

Researcher: Mmm. And so there's...there's growth and there's um special things about you and your life that are a consequence of not having your mom, but that doesn't change the fact that that will always be a very painful thing.

131. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: Very painful fact –

132. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: – at the same time.

133. Sheila: Ja, ja it will, it just will (laughing). And it's okay, like I mean...the worst thing that comes out of that is that I get sad. And ...(next few words are inaudible). It's uh, ja. Like I can imagine what it's going to feel like when I'm thirty, when I'm forty, you know. Just like, maybe I'll be able to communicate better with her. That's going to grow. That's the next kind of development, that I'm going to say, "What would you say about this, hey?" or, "Aren't you proud of me now?" or...but um I will be able to – like I'll only – well I'll always look back and say, "Well, I'm this little teenager and I miss my mom". It's very sad but it doesn't make me less able – it doesn't disable me in any way any more. Um ja, it's different, like different ways of dealing with things, different abilities to deal with similar things. And what's nice, it's true that like my coping, like how I cope is um – is very useful, because it's gone all the way deep down, it's not like superficial coping. And it really works. So I'll be able to handle most things.

Researcher: Right. So there's a sense of being able to handle things better in having gone through this.

134. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: Can you say more about this sense?

135. Sheila: Um well it's not only like because it's a sort of relative emotional experience, and like an innocence versus experience, and like because I've experienced it I'll be able to handle anything else. Or like sadness won't be as hectic. It's not – it's that in a way, but um...

Researcher: You mean it's – other things are less painful relatively?

136. Sheila: Ja, ja. Not less painful, but like if – if for example, like if a sword had gone inside me and then it was taken out and then I healed, but I always had a hole there. Other things could go in there and it wouldn't be – it just wouldn't go as deep, but I'd still be able to – I'd still feel sore. In a way, it's like a continuum and it just doesn't go to the extreme. Like nothing's really – sadness. No, no, I can't really say that, I can't really say that everything is relative to it, and that I don't get as sad. Because sometimes things lead me straight back to that same sadness, and it links back and it's just the same. But I think just my coping with that sadness, my understanding of that sadness is at a level where it will always be – it's hit rock bottom and it's going back now. So it will always be integrated into who I am because I know who I am. And I know who I am because I've felt every thing of me, every part of me. And I know parts of–

Researcher: (Turning over the tape) Sorry you were saying…

137. Sheila: Um I think just that I know who I am.

Researcher: Because you feel like you've been to all parts of you.

138. Sheila: Yes, ja, ja.

Researcher: The trauma has taken you –

139. Sheila: Yes, ja. Ja, completely.

Researcher: That's – ja, that's profound. And that image of the sword wound, that's um the deepest intrusion or – and anything else that comes in is less deep in a way um, as if there's a holding capacity created by –

140. Sheila: Yes, ja.

Researcher: Is that –

141. Sheila: Yes. Ja, ja. That's a good way to put it. Because...it's not that other things don't hurt me as much, it's just that I understand them in a kind of different way to before. Ja (laughing).

Researcher: Understand in a different way?

142. Sheila: Um, like – like I see them…(next few words are inaudible)…I don't know actually, ja, that's the thing. Like if my boyfriend broke up with me I'd feel just as sad, and then I'd feel alone. And then I'd feel so sad that it'd make me think about my mom, and then I'd get so sad. And then after that, I would pick myself up and say, "Well, you know, I've still got me." And that's come from um having done that in the past. Ja...so it's not that the hurt is different it's just that the getting up after the hurt is. Which is good – it works.

Researcher: And you trust your ability to do that.

143. Sheila: Ja, ja. Ja, I know that I can do it, I know that no matter what happens to me I'll still be able to – I'll be fine.

Researcher: Sho.

144. Sheila: I'd be very sad to lose my boyfriend (laughing).

Researcher: Ja. You've learnt how – at rock bottom how to get back from there.

145. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: Sho...And it's not that you're not feeling, you're still feeling –

146. Sheila: Ja!

Researcher: – you're open to experience – experiencing those feelings and trusting your capacity to cope.

147. Sheila: Ja. And rock bottom, like now that I know where rock bottom is or how it feels, like it's not as scary? It's almost like a joke, actually. Like my friend and I, we used to – 'cause she had gone through similar drama, and after long nights of partying we would wake up the next morning and feel like hungover, badly hungover. And be like: "This is rock bottom, hey?" And we'd make big jokes about being at rock bottom and knowing that this is rock bottom. And also knowing that it could only get better from here, so actually it's not that big a deal. You know I don't have to be scared of rock bottom anymore 'cause...And it's not only a it-can't-get-worse-than -this like pessimistic thing. It's well, this is as bad as it gets! (laughing).

Researcher: Sho, and I wonder what that does to that feeling you had before of being a victim?

148. Sheila: Ja, it's so different. It seems like a different– well it is a different part of me. The victim is like...that "give up" sense. Like instead of getting to rock bottom and saying "Whoa this is rock bottom, let's try and find a way out, like look up. Like look up!" (laughing) The victim is like, (in simpering voice) "Oh, this is rock bottom, oh dear. I give up, I'm here."

Researcher: Like giving in to that.

149. Sheila: Ja! I'm so over that, like I'm so over doing that to myself actually, like. It gets triggered by little things every day. Every day I want to give up in a way at some point, I want to say: "Oh, this is rock bottom, oh what am I going to do?" Everyday, like. Like sometimes I get jealous because my boyfriend is like – like social, like he's very flirty. He's a flirt. And like what I used to do is freak out at him, and then it'd be a crisis.

But now, now that I know I'm worth so much to myself, and I'm worth so much to him, like I don't take it so seriously. And like I don't feel like: "Oh, give up on me and give up on our relationship, and give up on him, because clearly I can't trust, because I can't trust myself". You know, all that stuff is tied into saying, "No, I know who I am." I know how – like I'm worth this relationship. He loves me because, gosh I'm – I'm me. And I like me. Ja, so that sense of self worth is – is so, it can either be triggered by rock bottom, or it can be crushed by rock bottom. It's always my choice, and I always know when it's my choice. And like if I'm feeling like I'm tending towards giving up, I walk in the garden and I'm like: "Okay." And like garden... mommy time...me... "Who am I?" And then, like I can take lots of breaths. And then I'll say, "Well you know, it's okay (laughing) actually, he's just hurt. He loves me, it's fine. He will..." Um, you know, so what this wasn't accepted by whoever, you know, whatever negative thing it was that threatened to throw me over the edge (laughing). Um I used to, ja. I mean now it's such a healthy perspective that I've got, um but it's been a process. Before, like a year ago or even a long time before that, um I was convinced that I was completely borderline, and that one like speck of criticism and my whole entire idea of myself will crumble. You know, and then – it sometimes feels like that, it feels that bad, like: "Oh my gosh, I'm crazy, someone doesn't like me." Or, you know, "I don't belong here" or something. Um then I'll say, "Well, you know, this is as bad as it gets. You know, worry, you assess it, you think". (Next few words are inaudible).

Researcher: And how um – how long would you say you've felt different in terms of having a more um – not giving up but fighting, problem-solving, believing in your worth? How long have you had that sense, or that that's been happening?

150. Sheila: Um...well, I mean, I've always had it in my – um it's always sort of been in the corner of my mind saying, "It's an option, you can do this!" (laughing) But only actually taken that option solidly in the last week or two...three. Um applying for masters has really kick-started my motivation to um pull myself up towards myself (laughing). Ja, so an upcoming challenge has definitely, you know, "The pressure is on!" Like it helps. Ja, which is tied in with self-worth, it helps. It's a circular thing.

Researcher: So it's been in the last three weeks or so that you've had the perspective – it's like a perspective shift, ja. And before that it was – before applying to masters that motivation to – which is – well, that perspective wasn't really...

151. Sheila: It was – it was a work in progress, but actually, getting the forms which I got – which is – almost two months ago – I read them and put them back in the envelope, and then took them out the last three weeks. Um I think it's – what did you ask again?

Researcher: Um...

152. Sheila: Oh yes, I remember what I wanted to say um. I didn't think I could, that's why. I just didn't think I could. 'cause I thought – just thinking I couldn't – I thought like possibly. And then...And then I started thinking about it more and more and I thought, "Actually, I'm going to apply, it doesn't matter if I get in as long as I apply, because

there's a possibility that I could get in. Because I have (next few words are inaudible)"....Ja, since I made those kind of decisions they really sort of stapled together my "don't give up before you try" nonsense. And that's actually how the conversation with my father and my sister occurred, was because I was like, "Don't give up, I'm not going to". And my dad – how it started was like we were making supper and my dad was like: "So, what do you think you're going to do next year?" And I said that I was going to apply for masters. He was like "really?" and I was like, "Ja." And he was like, "Well! I mean..." And he was about to go on a rampage of: "How do you think you're going to do it?" You know. And it comes from a place of love because he doesn't want us to get hurt. So he's like, "Maybe you shouldn't." It's not that he wants to...He just plays devils advocate so much that it's like, "Oh gosh dude, I mean seriously, I really don't need this right now." And that's what I did for the first time in forever, my whole life. I was like: "Actually, I think I can do it. I think I'm..." About two weeks before that I'd been walking in the garden and I'd said to myself that I was a very important person – oh yes, I'd watched Men in Black, it's a silly little like stream of consciousness. But in Men in Black, there's – the alien picks up this girl and he's taking her back to the alien spacecraft and he's like, "It's a long trip, I'll need a snack." And then she's like, "I'm a very important person on my planet! A queen even!" (laughing) And like – and then she's like freaking out. And he's like, "Well, whatever, your majesty." And he throws her up into the tree or whatever. But when she says that, like in defense of self, "I'm a very important person, you can't eat me." Like that, that went straight into – straight to my head. And I was having conversations with somebody about feeling like a very important person and I went into the garden and had a cigarette. And I was like: "I'm a very important person," (laughing) and like I walked around the garden with a cigarette. And like I realised then that actually, if I think I'm a very important person , I'll do very important things and activities in life, and I'll get what I want. And so when my dad started hucking me about whether I was masters material, I was like, "No, I'm sorry, I don't care what you think. Like I'm going to – I'll try. I don't care if I fail, I'll just try." So that's part of the not giving up thing.

Researcher: Ja, sure. And whether you get in or not, the going for it and the experience of this process even in applying is worthwhile –

153. Sheila: Ja, ja. And so many people have said that, so I was like "Ja, no, of course I'm going to try."

Researcher: But it seems – it sounds like – 'cause I was hearing quite a significant shift in terms of hitting rock bottom and, "I'm okay because I know how to get up," and that, "I know who I am, that makes me important." Um so getting in touch with – it has been the last two months that it's been um – got stronger –

154. Sheila: – crystallised.

Researcher: Okay, crystallised. But before then? How um much of that was happening before two months ago? Um was it quite a dramatic shift to that or was it um a work in progress before then?

155. Sheila: Um, from the beginning of honours, so beginning of the first term, I started noticing differences in my self-esteem, like it being built everyday. I made some nice friends, participated well in class. The thing is that I studied through xxx (a university) before so –

Researcher: Oh – before this –

156. Sheila: Ja. So I've never – I've never known what my standard was, because I never had a class. I always studied on my own and I always just tried. And I realised that my marks were quite good, and that um relative to everyone else in my class, I'm – so ja. So that pulled my self-esteem up big time.

Researcher: So it's been a year – um a year's progression towards this point, now just stapled together.

157. Sheila: Yes.

Researcher: This sense of strength of self um sort of six months or so. And going before then, do you feel that you did not really have access to that?

158. Sheila: Ja. I think um I felt a dichotomy between the two: one half of me really felt that I could do better, and the other half holding me back and being the little kid.

Researcher: Okay. And being that kid you've been for a decade?

159. Sheila: Ja, ja. And it's sort of – and it's always – ja, it's just like pieces of pie. The kid part has shrunk a little bit in proportion to the part of myself that's more nurturing. It's happened exponentially in the past two months, and then two years before that, and then eight years before that, kind of thing. So like I was a little girl when my mom died –

Researcher: Trying to get a developmental –

160. Sheila: Ja, so I was a little girl. And then I was a teenager – but a hurt teenager, and then like a pissed off, rebellious one. But the Little Girl was still with me the whole time um because she hadn't been – she hadn't been spoken to by anyone, including me. I was just subjected to her feelings and like stuff, and then sort of ups and downs with adolescence. And then um – and then finishing school, getting some independence, getting a job, doing my um tertiary university correspondence, which is also a sense of independence and autonomy, where the Little Girl got – got forgotten still because she still hadn't been talked to and um. And there was a small part of me, The Nurturer who had through my studies and through my experiences um sort of come to light about eight years after – no, six – no, I'd say five years after. Okay thirteen to twenty, seven years of carrying the Little Girl. Twenty to twenty-three, um being aware of the Little Girl and The Nurturer being born or becoming accessible, um twenty three. Turning twenty-four,

being in an excellent environment, the Little Girl was picked up and held and The Nurturer grew. And um then this year I turned twenty-five, and the Little Girl's with me all the time. And – but – but I love myself enough to say it's okay for her to come with (laughing).

Researcher: Sho.

161. Sheila: So that's cool for her, and it's cool for – ja, it's cool for both of us.

Researcher: The Little Girl and The Nurturer.

162. Sheila: Ja. Because we help each other, I'm sure. The Little Girl is incredibly creative – like some of the stuff, and like the links – I mean she knows my mom better than I do, in a way. Because of the stories my mom used to tell. And, so ja. That's it. That's the story (laughing). Ja.

Researcher: It's special. Okay, I have a sense of the timing of that now.

163. Sheila: Ja. It makes me proud, where I'm at now, and I'm really happy. And like I wish I'd had help, but I didn't. Which makes me a little bit more proud (laughing). But at the same time, um I want to help other people. Just the beginning bit is really tough.

Researcher: And something like of an achievement to have gotten to this point.

164. Sheila: Ja, ja. And coming to counselling is like a validation of that. It's like: "You've come so far, you've walked there by yourself like" (laughing). Ja, no referrals. Ja.

Researcher: "I've brought my child."

165. Sheila: Yes! (laughing).

Researcher: (laughing) "My child needs therapy".

166. Sheila: (laughing) Ja...Ja, exactly...That's a good way of putting it. Okay.

Interview 2

Researcher: It's our second meeting, how are you feeling after...?

167. Sheila: It actually brought up a lot of stuff that I hadn't thought of, and like I had a bit of a tough time afterwards. Ja, it was horrible (laughing) in like some ways but it still – like actually, I found it quite difficult. Like talking about it was easier than dealing with it afterwards, and also like my boyfriend's being horrible so it hasn't helped

(laughing). But I'm glad that like – when I was running up the stairs just now, I was like, "I'm glad I'm coming back."

Researcher: So mixed feelings about it.

168. Sheila: Yes (laughing).

Researcher: And um more brought up afterwards than actually here.

169. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: Um in what kind of way?

170. Sheila: Um well, I felt quite vulnerable afterwards, um I felt like I had a need to be nurtured. Um and that wasn't fulfilled sort of by any means.

Researcher: And that ties in with boyfriend probs.

171. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: Okay.

172. Sheila: I was really surprised.

Researcher: And um very understandable that after talking about such personal and deep feelings um you would feel vulnerable, and like needing to be comforted.

173. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: Was it okay to talk about it?

174. Sheila: Ja! ja. Talking about it – I didn't find it difficult. I mean it was sad and...full of all sorts of feelings (laughing) but talking about it was fine.

Researcher: Okay. It's a good thing that you have an appointment for later.

175. Sheila: Yes, ja, I'm very glad about that.

Researcher: And probably the timing's perfect then.

176. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: Um so last time um we said that I'd have some questions to come back to, and I've had a chance to listen to the tapes again and have a think, but also for you to – a chance for you, with having had a few days hindsight to um mention things or change things or – I don't know if you've had any comments like that, questions of your own?

177. Sheila: Mmm I haven't really had a chance to think about it um.

Researcher: Okay, okay.

178. Sheila: No regrets though (laughing).

Researcher: That's good to hear. Um okay, there were a few things that I wanted to clarify that I've understood correctly or – ja, so perhaps we should start with those. Um at one point we were talking about the forest and um the metaphor of that and I felt that I might have missed you a little bit in – in that, and I wasn't quite sure um in the meaning of that and it about it being more about your mom's death than about her life. But actually, more about your life – that became clear. Just to check that, ja, that needs some clarification.

179. Sheila: Mmm.

Researcher: And are we talking about that peak experience time?

180. Sheila: Um well, since then it's been anytime I'm in the wilderness, but that was the first and most powerful time.

Researcher: Yes, yes. So in the forest it's – it's a general being in the outdoors and being in nature. And it being life-affirming for you, very much a part of your journey and your purpose, but also you mentioned about it being more about your mom's death than her life, and I'm not sure that I'd understood fully.

181. Sheila: Um I don't know if I do either, but I think it's something about because she's gone and she's part of everything again, um which ties into my belief structure about um sort of the afterlife being um... uh that we just become part of everything again.

Researcher: Okay.

182. Sheila: So we're born out of the oneness and the unity that is – that is most accessible through the wilderness. And then, when we die – or when my mom died, she became part of the earth again. So it's my connection to her and it's only because she's gone that the connection is there.

Researcher: Okay, so it ties in with spiritual beliefs.

183. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: Um so it's cyclical, and is it that in dying, we literally go back to earth, but it seems that on a spiritual level there's –

184. Sheila: – Ja, ja definitely, um. We become all seeing, all knowing, all feeling on a very high plane, but ja, where – where like feelings and memories are all just… so small, um but never forgotten. Just so part of everything.

Researcher: Um is that the same as what you were taking about, about a kind of collective unconscious?

185. Sheila: Ja, ja ja, definitely. Ja, the river of life… it's all one.

Researcher: Okay, we're clear on that. Has – has um dealing with this traumatic loss impacted on your spirituality?

186. Sheila: Ja, I would definitely say so, but I wasn't brought up in a particular denomination. My parents were (next word is inaudible) like sort of agnostic as far as I knew, even though I'd asked them continually if they believed but they wouldn't really answer me. But my grandparents are very religious, my grandpa's a Methodist um priest. So before my mom passed away I wasn't really anything, I mean I believed that there was something bigger than all of us but then after she died that "something" became almost tangible, because it held her.

Researcher: Sho.

187. Sheila: Ja. It became more real, well the need arose as well, I suppose…. I'm quieter this time (laughing). Ja, but I do miss her because… ja, like I know when I need her. Now. Now that I've like become more accepting of my needs and where I'm at and who she was. Like in the growth, the – there's been a concomitant realisation of how much I actually...which is good developmentally or whatever, psychologically, ja. But it doesn't feel good. It doesn't feel better than before. It actually feels worse (laughing). But like being able to acknowledge it was good.

Researcher: And it's part of the healing process, acknowledging how much you needed her, how much you miss her.

188. Sheila: Mmm, ja. It makes me cross.

Researcher: It makes you cross?

189. Sheila: Ja. Ja, I mean I know your research is focusing on the benefits or like the growth afterwards, and I can understand why, it's such a huge part. Because like one forgets about it and the sufferer or whatever like…but it feels horrible and it has terrible effects (laughing) on relationships and stuff.

Researcher: Sure. And that's why growth is not something that is expected or it's not something that has to be there. It is, a lot of people do experience some growth, but in the context of a lot of pain. Um, ja.

190. Sheila: So I don't know. It's so difficult to feel both of them at the same time, like both relieved and happy that I've still got me and that I'm moving forward, but then also dreadfully sad and angry at the consequences. Like it's always swinging between the two, and I want to find the middle ground where I can just be with both of those feelings. I don't know if that's possible (laughing).

Researcher: I was reading – one of the articles I was reading was explaining that like um – you know those psychological – those perception tests where there's one picture of a woman. And you can see the one is a witch with a big nose, and the other one is this beautiful lady in the same picture?

191. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: It's the same picture, and sometimes you see the ugly witch, and sometimes you see the beautiful lady.

192. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: Both perspectives are accessible in the same thing.

193. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: It's the same thing but it's –

194. Sheila: Ja, that's a good analogy. And there isn't a value on either I suppose, because like the old witch has wisdom and experience and stories and the young one – she also has negatives and positives like vanity, but then also potential, so I suppose it's two sides of the same coin, well maybe two coins, I don't know.

Researcher: Potential and the wisdom and the – um but only can come out of that pain – that beautiful –

195. Sheila: Ja...

Researcher: Does that fit with how you've found it?

196. Sheila: Yes, definitely.

Researcher: Seeing both and feeling like it's swinging.

197. Sheila: Mm.

Researcher: Um okay so that was the one, the other thing I wanted to ask was how – we spoke about shifts in approaches to coping, um especially in surrendering or in picking yourself up from rock bottom, um and I wondered how conscious is that choice of approach?

198. Sheila: I don't know, I've felt it's very conscious, like how rock bottom I'm feeling, it's a very conscious decision. Like: "Okay, pull yourself together." It's very conscious and the more conscious it is the more effort there is, although maybe not. I think there's like a gradient, like on some days like I'll feel very conscious about it and it'll happen quite easily and quite quickly. And then on other days, when I'm not making the decision, it'll be a very unconscious um not realising I'm at rock bottom. But as soon as I realise I'm at rock bottom I – then it becomes conscious and then choice becomes emphasised.

Researcher: Does that tie in with what we were talking about seeing either the old women or the young lady?

199. Sheila: Um...Like seeing rock bottom in different ways...No.

Researcher: Okay. Another thing you mentioned was the meaning that xxx (an honours module) had for you. Um do you want to say more about the meaning that held for you?

200. Sheila: Just a bit about xxx, how I enjoyed it?

Researcher: Was there something about that that was quite relevant...I know we discussed it a little bit, we don't have to go into it if you don't feel you need to add anything to what was said.

201 Sheila: Um. It was very reaffirming – reaffirming of who I was and the way I thought and the way I experienced things. And how I – how I understood therapy to be completely based on relationships.

Researcher: Oh, okay.

202. Sheila: And life being based on relationships, and um the quality of them.

Researcher: The importance of.

203. Sheila: Ja, hugely. Maybe it's because I wanted to have a relationship with my mom. And then also the nature of relationships in my life, how they've been very high quality. And the people that love me love me a lot! But, I don't know why, but I see not only the negatives, but I see, you know where there's space for growth. So it relates more to my relationship with my father and my sister, my family now. Um but it, ja, it was a really wonderful experience, it definately helped kick start my – ja, my emotional forward-moving.

Researcher: One of the –

204. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: Um partly to do with not having your mom, emphasis on relationships?

205. Sheila: Mm. Building other ones and needing other ones more. And that's – that's like a double-edged sword because it puts a lot of pressure on my relationships, but at the same time, well, because of my expectations, my needs. At the same time those expectations are valid and it's what's going to be occurring with other people that I'm going to be working with at some point of my career. And even though those expectations are just kind of like misplaced for a little while um...

Researcher: Misplaced?

206. Sheila: Like, um things I can't get from my mom I then try get from other people, which doesn't sort of work. (Laughing) At all. But.

Researcher: There's been a gap where those needs haven't been filled. And the double edged – the other side of that?

207. Sheila: Is knowing what other people expect of me, as extreme as my expectations might have been or might be because of my loss, sort of post-loss expectations (laughing). I can sort of have insight into other people's expectations, not only of me but of other people when they are going through similar things. Or just sort of generally, even just like basics, you know, need for comfort or nurturance.

Researcher: And sensitive to the needs of other people – more so because of that.

208. Sheila: Ja, completely.

Researcher: And is there a difference in knowing their needs more, does that mean that –

209. Sheila: It means that I have a whole other repertoire of responses for those people. Like the experiences I've had in my life, with just friends and stuff – just anyone really, I can see what they need and then I can sort of validate what they're needing kind of thing. And it's cool, whatever they're feeling.

Researcher: And do you feel you um reach out more or give more because of that?

210. Sheila: Ja, oh completely. Ja, maybe even to my detriment. Well it wouldn't have been to my detriment if I was still not having the same expectations that somebody else – like I put out so much, I expect so much in return in a way. And that's part of my expectations that I think I need to change at the moment, definitely.

Researcher: Okay so it's um hurtful having such high expectations because it means being aware when they're not met, but at the same time um it allows you to give a lot of love, and it's something that you're working on.

211. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: Um this is something that has come up in the other things that you've spoken about, but um would you say that um dealing with – with the loss of your mom has – has made any changes in the way you approach life – anything you want to add to that regard?

212. Sheila: I don't know if...I don't know where it comes from but I do kind of feel...It's going to sound weird but like (laughing) I do kind of feel special in a way. Like, and different. And that's really cool because it adds to my uniqueness, and then that links straight to who I know I am. And who my mom reminded me I was in the forest that day. Um so I suppose, ja, it still links to that: "I know what I'm here for, I know what my purpose is."

Researcher: And that's – that's through this whole experience?

213. Sheila: Ja, hugely. Ja.

Researcher: Okay so a greater – in dealing with this, as hard as it is, it has also clarified sense of purpose.

214. Sheila: Ja, definitely.

Researcher: It's also hard um...I know that my research is looking at growth after trauma, but I know that there's not just – there's – because you're a whole person and you have – there's a lot of other areas, a lot of other variables. So it's also to clarify what is because of that and what is not. Like you were saying – I'm not talking about this area anymore, I'm just saying in general, because there are other things that have changed, other influences. like your relationships and being in the course which might have also caused changes that aren't necessarily from –

215. Sheila: – Oh okay, yes.

Researcher: So it's just for me to um be careful.

216. Sheila: And differentiate.

Researcher: Ja, because something may have nothing to do with it.

217. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: But um – or partly or totally.

218. Sheila: Ja. I think that my approach to therapy and wilderness therapy in particular is directly from that experience – the peak experience and the experience of my

mom's death. A mixture of those two things. Um I think my work definitely, my work and my career is influenced by it. Um and it – ja, the insights I feel I have because of that, definately.

Researcher: And the connection you feel to people who are in need.

219. Sheila: Ja…

Researcher: Okay….um and other things like you – your love for the environment, you would have been involved in regardless, but not quite in the same way.

220. Sheila: Maybe not as wholeheartedly. Because I think if I had more of my mom's influence while she was alive, during my adolescence I would have um – would've had various like – I may have been influenced in other ways, like by her other sort of social endeavours. Like sort of trade unions and stuff, which I didn't because she wasn't there. And what I did have of her I built on specifically and I got like proficient in them more. And my interest in it flowered hugely over the past five or six years. Ja, like learning about the plants and identifying trees and birds and stuff, which is ja, very useful! (laughing).

Researcher: And spiritually – we spoke about how um there was more awareness, spiritually, after that because there was also more a need to have a sense of it.

221. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: And also in terms of personally, your sense of purpose, it's also – coping with this has also impacted. And also in relationships, there's negative changes as well, but capacity for good as well.

222. Sheila: Mmm.

Researcher: Any other changes you can think of that are specifically linked to coping with that loss?

223. Sheila: Um I would – I would. Like I'm reiterating but I think it would definitely be the fact that I'm not afraid of being sad.

Researcher: Mm, ja.

224. Sheila: I remember that was the first time I experienced any kind of – anything afterwards, the first time I told a friend of mine in hostel – that was two months after as I started a new school. And um I told her and um I remember telling her it was okay because she got so upset. So I was immediately like wanting to make sure – like reassure her. Um, ja a sense of independence.

Researcher: Mm, and that too.

225. Sheila: Ja, so.

Researcher: And more so because of it...

226. Sheila: Ja, my emotional independence. Although I'm struggling with that (laughing), but like that's just at the moment.

Researcher: Can it maybe be both at the same time, a greater neediness but also autonomy?

227. Sheila: Ja, for different emotions I suppose.

Researcher: Ja, mm I wonder if there's something else that can be said about that?

228. Sheila: Ja, I'm thinking I don't really get lonely that much. Like whenever I'm alone I see it as an opportunity to um explore things that I'm thinking and feeling about things in my life at that point in time or in the past. And that's inspired lots of journaling and things like that. So I think that's tied in to not feeling lonely, enjoying being alone sometimes.

Researcher: And also on practical levels.

229. Sheila: Ja, ja....

Researcher: But in other ways...there's more dependence emotionally.

230. Sheila: Ja, like when it comes to sadness I get very dependent, I need people. But I can get very happy all on my own. And I can feel fulfilled or excited and I don't feel like I need to share it in order to experience it more. Um like awe and wonder, those sorts of emotions I enjoy having them by myself. Um ja, those are all positive things. I suppose anger...anger I can really get into being by myself as well. Um I don't really like being around other people when I'm angry (laughing). It's just sadness really, I like having somebody around... Ja, I can't think of anything else really. Um...I can, well I always, well I can talk politics – that's just directly from her. And I can stick to an ideology and not be sort of ashamed just because it's not part of the status quo. Like um – like when it comes to socialism or communism I can have great debates with people but that's because I have a sense of pride. And my mom believes in it so I believe in it. But it's still a sort of sticking-to-my-guns kind of thing. Ja, but otherwise I can't really think of anything else.

Researcher: Um... oh yes, um you spoke of "coasting", using that word that was attached to the first ten or so years um more or less, and it sounded almost as if that was – that was a time of not talking about it, not being as in touch. Um and I also remember that you had been journaling and being creative during that time as well, which sounded quite in touch to me. So I was just wanting to clarify that.

231. Sheila: I was personally in touch, but just not socially.

Researcher: Oh.

232. Sheila: Because of the rest of the family. Ja, I was always in touch with like how severe I was feeling, how I was feeling definitely.

Researcher: Sho, and you would always write it out.

233. Sheila: Ja, ja, hugely.

Researcher: So it wasn't a denial to yourself.

234. Sheila: No, like the only sort of – um I did a bit of bargaining, like, "Oh, nothing bad is going to happen to me because this badness has already happened." Um so I took higher risks. Ja, but I mean that's sort of like adolescence kind of stuff anyway.

Researcher: Okay, so it was just socially. The processing was private but not social. So maybe tell me what "coasting" means in your own words?

235. Sheila: Ja. I suppose I think my family was doing coasting kind of stuff. Because we weren't getting involved in each others' emotions at all. It was very superficial. And I would say that was actually for the first five years. Ninety-five to two thousand.

Researcher: Just avoiding talking about it.

236. Sheila: Yes. And avoiding processing, and avoiding finding out how everyone else was feeling, just because of fear. And ja, so I think the coasting was sort of like brushing on varnish: "Everything's fine, we're all so strong". Um and I remember writing a poem called *We Passed the Glue Around.* And um, ja, it was about how we'd all have tea, just drink a lot of tea. And no one would say anything really. We'd just pass the glue around (laughing). Stick yourself together kind of thing. Like broken hearts, just stick them back together. Which I resent now, looking back. I would've expected more, um and that's what we're doing now, (laughing) piecing our family back together and stuff. Which is nice, it's actually really cool because it's something I've wanted. And now I know how to do it, now I know how to facilitate a process that – so that I'm not giving – like so that it's not superficial at all. So really cool, it's not glue-sticking nonsense.

Researcher: It's real.

237. Sheila: Ja. So I think we're coping – it's like sort of the mechanics of the coping mechanism are the same but for different reasons now. Like before it was to cope and to coast and to be okay, and now it's to build and to fix and to explore. So.

Researcher: Ja, it needed, maybe – It was survival, crisis time, just get through the day kind of thing. Whereas, as you say, now it's to build.

238. Sheila: Ja, it's more real and it's deeper. Ja, it's nice.

Researcher: And you're playing a very instrumental role in facilitating that. That must take a lot. I wonder what it takes, being able to do that, and where that comes from?

239. Sheila: Ja...

Researcher: I know that's a huge question!

240. Sheila: (laughing) Ja. It's nice, that's a good question. 'cause I remember when I was younger – no, I don't know if it was that much younger. When I wasn't as aware of the process of understanding people's feelings and instigating communication – I don't know, therapy really. Like poking , prodding whatever, I used to stir. Like um we had a Xhoisan nanny, and she used to call me spoon 'cause I used to just come and stir (laughing). So I think I've always had it in me, to sort of see how is everyone and not just saying, "Fine" – not – never being able to take that as an answer (laughing). And also just saying – like caring to such an extent that like I'm willing to let someone get pissed off with me because I want to (laughing) check that they're alright.

Researcher: So that's always been in your nature.

241. Sheila: Ja, it has definitely always been in my nature. Ja, um but my nature only really being reawakened in the last five years. The first five years where I didn't talk to other people about it, talk to the family...

Researcher: And when you say "reawaken", is it like going back to the level that you were at previously, or are there some ways that it's less – less – a lower level and on some ways on a higher level? Can you compare now to then?

242. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: Is there something different um having gone through this, or does it kind of back to equilibrium?

243. Sheila: It's difficult to say. I would say it's back to equilibrium in a way, um but it can never be that because my mom's gone. So equilibrium isn't the same. It's like – but it's good though, whatever it is, the reawakening. It all ties in with a sense of self. And how that sense of self was reaffirmed by my ideas about my mom and how my mom lives through me and what parts of her I have. Um sort of the warrior side of her, we're both tall and we both love Chinese dogs, (laughing) you know, that sort of stuff. So catching up with parts of myself that might've been growing in the background could well be very similar to parts of her. Um that I wouldn't know about but maybe because she's not here, I explore them more. Whereas I suppose other people that have their moms around kind

of push their – they're kind of like, "Oh my gosh, I'm acting just like my mom!" And they might push that away or whatever. Like I know my friend does, she's a lot like her mom in some ways but her mom's very involved in her life. So she's quite –

Researcher: Needing to separate.

244. Sheila: Ja. And then because my mom's not there I find those things and nurture them.

Researcher: Right, and because your mom – from what you understand, from what it sounds like, was a very strong and passionate woman, so connecting with good parts of her and exploring those for yourself.

245. Sheila: Mm, mm.

Researcher: Maybe in a way that is more so because you have – haven't had to push away.

246. Sheila: Ja, ja, I feel like that... And I've like – ja, I've taken everything that she said. Everything I can remember I use and value to a completely different degree to people who've had their parents around.

Researcher: And use.

247. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: Making the most out of those... and not taking for granted.

248. Sheila: Ja, ja like honouring.

Researcher: Mm. Does that go with um having a clearer sense of purpose?

249. Sheila: Ja, it like helps guide the way in a way. Like um – like if I was walking in the forest on my path, everything she said would be a particular kind of flower next to the path the whole way. So if the path does get overgrown I know the flowers are on the side. So that must be where I should walk at some point. Um ja, definitely. And when I think about who I am and if I need like reassurance about um whether something is good for me or not, that translates into the clearness of the path, and what – ja, what's grown on it.

Researcher: And in a way that's different to if she was still here.

250. Sheila: Ja, if she was still here like I would be able to see her path. But I can't so I just have some like, some flowers. Which is weird, because I suppose like people put flowers on people's graves and stuff. But ja, like if – like if I could've seen her path then things would be way clearer.

Researcher: Okay.

251. Sheila: But I can interpret the signs instead (laughing).

Researcher: But it feels like less?

252. Sheila: Ja, much less. It's a lot less. But it's also just different. I mean, ja, there's a lot to be said for finding the flowers (laughing) and picking them and seeing them and using them and carrying them. So.

Researcher: But it doesn't substitute.

253. Sheila: Ja, no, it doesn't.

Researcher: We've gone through – At the end of our last chat you helped put a timeline to your changes in coping, um and I was wondering if other people had commented – if they'd noticed –

254. Sheila: – changes in me.

Researcher: Ja.

255. Sheila: Just my boyfriend. And my sister. Um but all sort of quite recent, all in the last sort of three to four years, three years.

Researcher: How long you been with your boyfriend?

256. Sheila: Almost two. Ja, so ja, I mean like we met when I was – I was good, I was happy and everything, and then, you know, I've just grown in leaps and bounds since then. Partly because of him and of his personality, not because of his support because his support is really crap. Like his –

Researcher: His support – oh, oh, oh.

257. Sheila: The way he supports me is insanely useless (laughing). But he as a personality is amazing, a fantastic person. He's quite an inspiring person. Like I can use – like there's parts of him that I'm like, "Ah, I'm going to be that or use them as another instrument and stuff." But he's very hard, a hard person. Um he like, well he knows what his crap is, although I don't know how well he knows it. But he knows what my crap is. And he knows also that he's not responsible for my crap, so he doesn't take responsibility for it at all. He's like, "This is your nonsense and you have to figure it out on your own." Kinda thing, and that's his attitude to this, these interviews that I'm doing. Which has made it very difficult for me (laughing). Um and it's made me very angry. So that's horrible (laughing).

Researcher: Ja, ja. Not supporting you at this time.

258. Sheila: Not just – not now, not about this. He views it as a sort of digging up old graves for no reason, he never really gets it. But at the same time, there is a possibility that I rely on him too much for like emotional support. But it also feels like it's on his terms frustratingly.

Researcher: So that's something also to work on.

259. Sheila: Ja, ja (laughing).

Researcher: Sho.

260. Sheila: That was a digression but I'm sure it started somewhere useful.

Researcher: Ja, um that he and your sister had noticed.

261. Sheila: Yes, and my sister – really she's not like incredibly warm (laughing). She has her moments and she has said like fantastic things. You know, that she looks up to me and that she's so proud of me and that I – that I've – that I inspire her to move forward. She's younger than me. Those sorts of things are nice, like that she's acknowledged.

Researcher: Sure.

262. Sheila: She's awesome.

Researcher: Um....Ja, that's all. Everything else I think we've covered. Ja, there's a sense that while it's really difficult there's a lot of um courage to go through the difficulty and that there has been um areas that have opened up. That there's a sense of purpose, and especially with um helping other people and reaching out to people and therapy. And using the pain of this to connect with people. And being able to connect so much more with people in certain circumstances, but on the other hand being left hanging in others.

263. Sheila: Mm.

Researcher: But the growth part – the empathy. Um...ja and also being able to cope with – well, knowing that you can pick yourself up.

264. Sheila: Ja, I think that's a big one.

Researcher: That's been big.

265. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: And also having a passion for the environment and all those – all those areas that we've spoke about – those are especially growth – growth things that have come out with coping with this loss.

266. Sheila: I think I'd say empathy to a slightly lesser degree than the other things. Because I did feel very empathic before. I remember in primary school crying because a little girl was crying because she couldn't (next word is inaudible).

Researcher: You mentioned that universal sadness.

267. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: Um okay, so always caring um and wanting to help others, that was from before.

268. Sheila: Ja, ja. But the picking myself up stuff and the wilderness therapy... linking wilderness and...

Researcher: Okay, so the empathy was here before, but also you mentioned that because you've been through this you can understand when people who have gone through loss.

269. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: And maybe you would've always had empathy, there was –

270. Sheila: It's more specific.

Researcher: Ja, and it's easier to um – to know what they need or to understand.

271. Sheila: Ja, ja.

Researcher: Which is maybe more than or specifically from this, like with that interaction with that little boy.

272. Sheila: Yes.

Researcher: And when friends phone you because they've gone through similar things.

273. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: Was that different, or – or not much change from before?

274. Sheila: Um I don't think too much change from before, it's just like circumstantial that I could help. But I think I would've maybe to a slightly more – maybe

it increased slightly. Or broadened with regards to loss. I think it is important that it was there before.

Researcher: Ja, okay, ja. Um and in terms of going into therapy, do you think you would have anyway?

275. Sheila: Um I don't know. No, I may have gone into law. I wanted to be a prosecutor. And then I changed, I think I got more sensitive and stuff.

Researcher: Okay, so is the wanting to be a therapist linked to coping with the trauma because it wasn't there before? I just want to be careful how I understand this.

276. Sheila: Ja, I think it's difficult to say. But I think I would probably say that because of the trauma I wanted to explore my own psychology which led me [to want] to be a therapist. And as I explore my own psychology I realised that I can do the same for other people. So it wouldn't – it may not have happened if my mom hadn't passed away.

Researcher: And more capacity for that, but on a foundation of a caring temperament (laughing).

277. Sheila: Ja.

Researcher: And sensitive.

278. Sheila: Ja, but I don't think it would have happened because I wouldn't have gotten so interested in my own psychology.

Researcher: Okay, okay.

279. Sheila: I think we got it down (laughing).

Researcher: Okay good (laughing). Is there anything else that we need to clarify or add or...

280. Sheila: No, I don't think so, no. Talked it all out, ja (laughing).

Researcher: Great.