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# The nature of benefit finding in parents of a child with Asperger syndrome

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### ABSTRACT

The present study examined the nature of benefit finding in 220 parents of a child with Asperger syndrome (AS) by developing and validating a multi-item Benefit Finding Scale for Parents of Children with AS (BFS-PCAS) and examining the relationships of benefit finding dimensions with positive and negative indicators of adjustment. Parents of children with AS completed questionnaires at Time 1 and 12 months later (Time 2). Exploratory factor analyses identified six benefit finding factors that were moderately inter-correlated: New Possibilities, Growth in Character, Appreciation, Spiritual Growth, Positive Effects of the Child, and Greater Understanding. Cross-sectional analyses showed that benefit finding was associated with higher levels of anxiety and positive affect. Results provide support for the use of a multi-item scale to measure benefit finding and for the differential relationships of benefit finding dimensions with positive and negative indicators of adjustment.

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Parents who have a child with special needs, such as a child with a diagnosis of Asperger syndrome (AS), face many challenges. Although these parents are confronted with many challenges, preliminary research has found that parents of children with AS also find a range of benefits in having a special needs child (Pakenham, Sofronoff, & Samios, 2004). Finding benefits in parenting a special needs child has also been documented in parents of children with Down syndrome (King & Patterson, 2000), AS and Nonverbal Learning Disorder (Little & Clark, 2006), autism (Tarakeshwar & Pargament, 2001) and developmental disabilities (Hastings & Taunt, 2002). This process of finding benefits in adverse events

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or circumstances has been termed *benefit finding* (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998) and has been conceptualised as a meaning making construct (Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004). Despite increased research interest in benefit finding, there are gaps in the meaning making literature with regard to the nature of benefit finding in parents who have a special needs child. It is the purpose of this study to examine the nature of benefit finding in parents who have a child with AS by developing a multi-item scale to measure benefit finding dimensions in parents of a child with AS, investigate the psychometric properties of this scale, and to examine the relationships between benefit finding dimensions and adjustment.

A child with AS will typically demonstrate difficulties in social functioning and communication patterns (Klin, McPartland, & Volkmar, 2005), may have a special interest that consumes the child's time and dominates the child's conversations (Attwood, 2007; Klin et al., 2005), have motor co-ordination problems (DuCharme & McGrady, 2003; Klin et al., 2005), experience difficulties with cognitive processing and learning (Reitzel & Szatmari, 2003), establish and enforce routines (Attwood, 2007), and experience sensory sensitivity (Attwood, 2007). These symptoms can present many parenting challenges and place considerable stress on the family (Higgins, Bailey, & Pearce, 2005). Indeed, families of children with an autism spectrum disorder experience greater stress and strain when compared with families who have a typically developing child (Sivberg, 2002). Thus, the losses, disruptions and challenges associated with having a child with AS are likely to propel parents into a search for meaning. Searching for and identifying benefits in having a special needs child may help parents find meaning in their predicament and help to restore meaningfulness.

Other terms used for benefit finding include *perceived benefits* (e.g., McMillen & Fisher, 1998), *posttraumatic growth* (e.g., Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), and *stress-related growth* (e.g., Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996). Although a meta-analysis on benefit finding was conducted on research that examined benefit finding and a range of similar terms such as stress-related growth and posttraumatic growth (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006), some researchers (e.g., Davis et al., 1998; Phipps, Long, & Ogden, 2007) hold that these terms represent distinct constructs, and thus, should not be used interchangeably with benefit finding. Terms such as posttraumatic growth assume that a seismic event challenges fundamental beliefs and goals in order to activate the process of growth (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Benefit finding does not assume that an individual has experienced traumatic stress (Phipps et al., 2007) as growth can also occur following situations that cause a gradual breakdown and rebuilding of an individual's assumptive world (Joseph & Linley, 2006), such as having a special needs child. Although it is acknowledged that terms such as posttraumatic growth are not synonymous with benefit finding, due to their similarity, research examining these similar constructs will be addressed to provide a more comprehensive understanding of finding benefits in adversity.

Benefit finding has been conceptualised by a number of different theorists. In their Assumptive Worlds Theory, Janoff-Bulman and colleagues (Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997; Janoff-Bulman & Yopyk, 2004) postulated that traumatic life events compel survivors to confront questions of meaning in their lives. A traumatic event such as the unexpected birth of a special needs child is likely to shatter an individual's fundamental assumptions about their invulnerability and worthiness as a person, and the world as benevolent and predictable. To the extent that an event undermines these assumptions, a sense of meaninglessness ensues. This state of meaninglessness causes profound distress which, in turn, is likely to trigger a struggle for the restoration of meaning. Janoff-Bulman and Yopyk (2004) distinguished between sense making and benefit finding in rebuilding an individual's assumptive world in the face of significant adversity. Successful adaptation involves first making sense of the traumatic event and then finding benefits in the event. Cognitive Adaptation Theory also highlights the importance of minimising the negative implications of adversity and restoring meaning through positively reevaluating circumstances (Taylor, 1983). Benefit finding has also been conceptualised as a cognitive reappraisal coping strategy by Park and Folkman (1997) in their extended stress and coping framework.

Benefit finding and growth have been assessed using a variety of measurement techniques including open questions, closed questions, multi-item self-report scales developed for particular studies and standardised questionnaires such as the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), and the Stress-Related Growth Scale (SRGS; Park et al., 1996). Although there is

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