

What is our research trying to achieve? What are the major topics? What methodology will be used?

Research Goals and Methodology

Our research program is to determine internal and external factors that facilitate Personality Growth (PG). We aim to investigate how adverse experiences lead to PG and impact psychological elements, such as cognition, affect, and motivation in interaction with situational and social resources. We connect the psychological elements to spiritual practices from a Christian-tradition point of view so that we investigate paramount aspects of PG: spiritual and psychological aspects of growth. To this end, we integrate longitudinal with experience sampling designs. Specifically, we use self-reports, objective/indirect assessments, and neuroscience methodologies to statistically and computationally model PG.

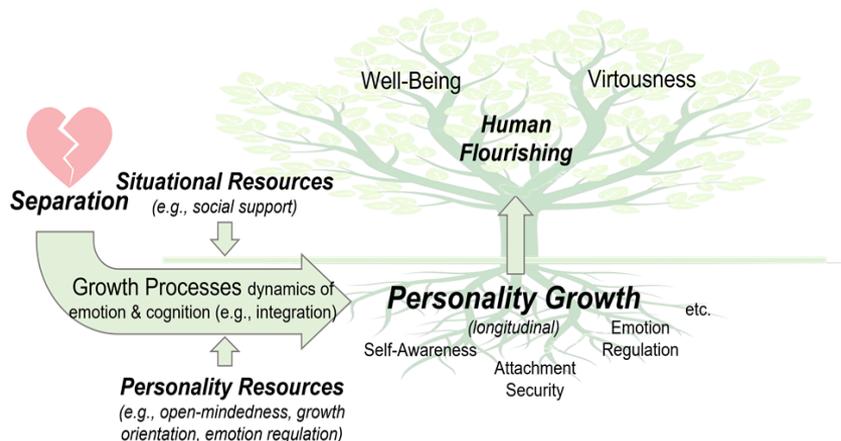
Personality Growth

Nevertheless, what is PG? PG is a trans-therapeutic and trans-religious issue of utmost societal relevance. It may be understood as enduring adaptive changes in different spiritual and psychological aspects. These aspects are self-awareness, self-esteem, self- and emotion regulation, attachment security, openness to experiences, need adjustment, personal strengths, spirituality, life appreciation, wisdom, character virtues, and agency. As a result, PG is a change toward eudaimonia – a type of well-being that involve sustainable stability, virtues, adaptive coping, and responsibility-taking rather than maximizing hedonic pleasure, which reflects corresponding changes in the brain and psyche (see the roots and the branches of the tree in Fig 1).

Personality Growth and Adversity

Anecdotal reports, philosophical perspectives, and psychological views converge on the notion of growth after adverse or traumatic experiences. Accordingly, PG is not merely a recovery or a return to a state of personality that preceded adversity. Instead, it cultivates becoming a state beyond the pre-adversity with more life satisfaction. An adverse experience such as separation may stimulate personality resources that gravitate individuals toward PG in collaboration with situational resources (see Fig 1). However, the spiritual and psychological aspects of PG may not directly observable but manifest themselves in human flourishing and eudaimonia, as mentioned above (The roots and the branches in Fig 1). As a result, we investigate PG after adversity or trauma from a biopsychosocial model (see Weststrate et al., 2021; Jayawickreme et al., 2021; Quirin & Kuhl, 2022).

Figure 1 Model of Personality Growth from Adversity



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Personality Growth in Theology and Philosophy

With our interdisciplinary approach, we also wish to pave the way for a deeper understanding of the Christian and other religious ideals of PG. Christian theology, for example, assumes that, on the one hand, human beings are created in the image of God and thus participate in certain divine qualities. Christian existence is often described as an inner journey and struggle to liberate oneself from alienation and a corrupted state, which may be derived from the misuse of the God-given freedom. This liberation cannot be achieved through a spiritual technique, such as “self-redemption.” However, it can be so by exposing oneself to the fullness of human experience and integrating it in a way that allows for inner growth. The path of spiritual growth is primarily a path of openness to and integration of experiences, especially the integration of adverse and painful experiences of loss and disappointment. Such integration requires the individual to be open to experience and confront adverse experiences, as painful as it is (Quirin & Kuhl, 2022).

Relatedly, the well-known philosopher of religion and theologian Eleonore Stump (2010) has argued in her work “Wandering in Darkness” that the growth process will enable a person to discover “the deepest desires of her heart.” Many people initially live in alienation from their deepest needs: pursuing goals that ultimately do not bring them inner fulfillment and peace. Stump argues that it is precisely the integration of painful experiences that fosters the gradual and never completed process of discovering the most-profound desires of the heart within oneself, i.e., to no longer live an alienated life. PG in the Christian tradition can thus be seen as a process of self-realization. Self-alienation impedes building a connection to the divine. A religious redeemer can connect to a person in a more profoundly healing way if the person is in touch with the deepest desires of her heart. A person who has found his or her innermost longings in this way is, from a Christian perspective, a person who has undergone spiritual growth. The process of PG is thus not always an easy one. Instead, it is often arduous with the painful integration of loss and disappointment.

As another prime example, let us also consider the “Spiritual Exercises” of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. His story is a rich study of the dynamics of spiritual conversion and psychological decision-making. His Spiritual Exercises document his process of grappling with life’s significant questions: to whom and what is one to commit, how to assess the goodness of one’s choices, and how to live in accord with that which enables growth and freedom. Thus, Ignatius’ implicit model of PG proceeds systematically from accepting the truth about one’s past to making a significant life decision, showing perseverance in the face of negative experiences, and finally giving one’s entire existence into the loving hand of God. Many other reference points in the Christian tradition refer to PG, such as the “Confessions” of *St. Augustine* or the *moral psychology of Thomas Aquinas*. Thus, the idea of PG as a complex final destination after adversity is a core assumption of most psychological theories of PG (Carl Rogers/Abraham Maslow: self-realization; Carl Gustav Jung: individuation; see also Quirin & Kuhl, 2022) and lies at the core of “human nature and divine realities” which is key to our program.

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