

Believable Visions of the Good: an Exploration of the Role of Pastoral Counselors in Promoting Resilience

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Abstract Although adjustment after trauma is often positively associated with meaning, some studies challenge this connection (Bonanno, *Memory*, 21(1), 150–156, 2013; Silver and Updegraff 2013). In this article we elaborate on the relation between existential meaning and resilience. First, we conceptualize existential meaning—searching for and finding meaning in life—in terms of “orienting in moral space”, using the philosophical ideas of Taylor (1989), the psychological meaning-making model of Park (*Psychological Bulletin*, 136(2), 257–301, 2010), and existential theory. We argue that orienting systems in moral space are “believable visions of the good”. We then search recent literature on resilience—in particular literature in which the connection with meaning is challenged—for indications of a connection with existential meaning. We conclude that resilience necessarily comprises a “moral dimension” that is an adaptive process of (eventually) finding meaning in life. Finally, we discuss implications for the role that pastoral counselors, as professionals in the domain of existential meaning, may play in promoting resilience in organizations where employees regularly face existential issues like violence, suffering, and death.

Keywords Existential meaning · Moral space · Charles Taylor · Resilience · Post-traumatic growth · Pastoral counseling

Introduction

Pastoral caregivers work in various organizations, such as the military, police departments, fire departments, and hospitals, where employees are regularly exposed to potentially traumatic situations. These situations involve confrontation with human destructiveness, violence, suffering, and death. The question of how to promote and maintain the resilience of employees in

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these organizations is an urgent one (Cornum et al. 2011; Schochet et al. 2011). This question is also relevant from the perspective of pastoral psychology and pastoral care (Carlin et al. 2015). Suffering, violence, and death are existential issues that belong to the domain of pastoral counseling; pastoral caregivers support people in dealing with existential questions and problems (Anderson 2010; Doehring 2014; Paulson 2001; Rynearson 2010; Stein 2002). This suggests that pastoral counselors can play an important role in promoting the resilience of police officers, soldiers, firefighters, and health professionals. However, this view does not seem to be generally accepted—neither within the organizations concerned nor within the scientific literature on resilience. In the military and police departments, for instance, pastoral counselors are not usually considered to be central figures in resilience training programs or treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Cornum et al. 2011; Fontana and Rosenheck 2004; Papazoglou and Andersen 2014; Smith and Charles 2010). In resilience literature, religion and spirituality are sometimes seen as important resilience factors (Pargament and Cummings 2010), but findings are ambiguous (Park and Slattery 2014). Spiritual and religious coping may also be negative and lead to negative psychological adjustment (Ano and Vasconcelles 2005; Peres et al. 2007).

In this article we aim to add to the theoretical basis for understanding the role that pastoral counselors, as professionals in the existential domain, may play in promoting and maintaining resilience. We do so by exploring the role of existential meaning in processes of resilience.¹ Existential meaning or meaning in life is a central issue in pastoral counseling. Pastoral counselors support people in their search for meaning in life, especially those people who are confronted with events that challenge their sense of life as meaningful. On the other hand, meaning is often—but not unequivocally—associated with adjustment to traumatic events and circumstances (Bonanno 2013; Janoff-Bulman 1992; Park 2013; Zautra 2009). By elaborating on the role of *existential* meaning in adjustment, we intend to arrive at a clearer picture of the potential of pastoral counseling with a view to resilience.

We start the article with a conceptualization of existential meaning. Here, we use philosophical ideas by Charles Taylor (1989) and ideas from existential theory (Frankl 1959; Yalom 1980) in order to arrive at an existentially colored version of the psychological meaning model of Crystal Park (2010). This results in an understanding of existential meaning as orienting systems in “moral space”, consisting of believable visions of the good life, and an understanding of finding meaning in life as a process of keeping oriented towards these visions. We then move to resilience, a concept that has been conceptualized in various ways; “indeed, the field has suffered from a lack of conceptual and terminological clarity” (Mancini and Bonanno 2010, p. 259). We follow *The Resilience Handbook* (Kent et al. 2014) in understanding resilience as a process of adjustment to challenging events or circumstances and as composed of three elements: recovery, growth, and sustainability. We carefully search recent literature on each of these elements of resilience for indications of a connection with existential meaning. In particular, we explore to what extent literature that questions the connection between meaning and resilience is also conclusive with respect to existential meaning. We conclude that processes of resilience necessarily comprise a “moral dimension” that consists of an adaptive process of (eventually) finding meaning in life. Finally, we discuss implications of our findings

¹ The considerations on existential meaning in this article might also be understood in terms of spirituality, since the experience of meaning in life is often associated with spirituality. We choose to stick to the term “existential” instead of “spiritual” as spirituality is often related to religion and we want to include nonreligious pastoral counselors (for instance, humanist chaplains) in our considerations.

for the role that pastoral counselors may play as promoters of resilience in organizations where employees face existential issues. It turns out that pastoral counselors have a twofold contribution to make to the resilience of such employees. They represent a hopeful perspective for the employees, and they function as a critical counterweight against visions of resilience as controllable and fitting within fixed time schemes that may be dominant in the organizations.

Existential questions: orienting in moral space

Both in philosophy and psychology, the idea that meaning is a central concern in human life has been around for quite some time (Proulx et al. 2013; Reker and Chamberlain 2000). This idea is particularly emphasized in existential traditions, where the search for meaning is considered to be the primary motivational force of human beings (Frankl 1959; Yalom 1980). Several authors have distinguished two domains of meaning that represent different ways of attempting to understand life and life events. Roughly speaking, the distinction is between seeking to understand (our) life in terms of our view of reality versus seeking to understand the worth of (our) life (Davis and Nolen-Hoeksema 1998; Janoff-Bulman and Frantz 1997; Park 2010). This may be understood as a distinction between meaning as comprehensibility and meaning as significance: “The first involves questions regarding whether something ‘makes sense’; in other words, whether it fits with a system of accepted rules or theories. The second involves questions regarding whether something is of value or worth” (Janoff-Bulman and Frantz 1997, p. 91). The distinction is also described as the difference between the “what” and the “why” of meaning (Proulx et al. 2013). The distinction is not sharp but fuzzy; meaning as comprehensibility and meaning as significance “intertwine and overlap” (Proulx et al. 2013, p. 9).

Searching for meaning involves the “somewhat metaphoric processes” (Park 2010, p. 260) of connecting life events to “general orienting systems” (Park 2010, p. 258). Several authors understand the search for meaning in terms of the spatial metaphor of orientation (e.g., Frankl 1959; Geertz 1973; Janoff-Bulman 1992; Pargament 1997). This metaphor has been underpinned philosophically by Taylor (1989) with respect to existential meaning or meaning in life. Existential meaning deals with existential questions—questions that address existence in general and our own life simultaneously: “Is there meaning in (my) life?”, “What is worth living for?”, and “What is the purpose of (my) life?” Taylor understands existential questions in spatial terms as making up a specific space that he calls moral space: “the space of questions about the good” (Taylor 1989, p. 41). Here, morality and the good are understood in a broad way as encompassing, in addition to questions concerning good and bad, issues of dignity and the fullness of life. Dealing with existential questions may then be understood as finding out where to go in moral space. Furthermore, existential meaning may be understood as referring to the orienting systems that guide us in moral space.

According to Taylor (1989), human existence *is* moral existence and we cannot but try to find our way in moral space. In this view, orienting in moral space is essentially linked to our sense of who we are and to our sense of being an agent. When we lose our orientation in moral space, we also lose agency because we do not know where to go (Taylor 1989, p. 31). Taylor argues that orienting systems in moral space consist of culturally rooted visions of what constitutes a good, full, and worthy life that we

“strongly” (p. 30) value and are committed to.² This points to the crucial dimension of meaning as significance in existential meaning; existential meaning necessarily involves commitment to an idea of the good life that is perceived as valuable and gives our life purpose. Meaning as comprehensibility alone cannot constitute existential meaning; an understanding of reality alone cannot guide us in moral space.

Existential meaning: believable visions of the good

Although meaning as significance is crucial in existential meaning, comprehensibility is necessarily involved in existential meaning too. Taylor (1989) mentions briefly that, in order to guide us in moral space, strongly valued visions of the good need to be “believable” (p. 17). Taylor does not dwell on the notion of believability that seems to have more psychological than philosophical relevance. However, a close look at Taylor’s work suggests that believability plays a twofold role in existential meaning. In the first place, our guiding visions of the good life comprehend a view of reality, of what is possible in this world. In order to function as orienting systems, our strongly valued visions of the good life need to be believable in the sense that they agree with our beliefs about reality. In other words, they need to be, to some extent, comprehensible (Taylor 1989, p. 57). In the second place, in order to orient in moral space, we need visions of the good that are not only believable in light of our view of reality in general but also in light of our view of the particular reality of our own life. We need to feel that these visions are not just distant, abstract ideals—that we can direct towards them and somehow integrate these visions in our particular life. So, existential meaning—our orienting systems in life—consists of believable visions of what, to us, represents the good life. Generally, the visions of the good that we orient towards are not articulated or explicit but are implicitly present in our lives as “moral intuitions” that guide us; “The moral ontology behind any person’s views can remain largely implicit. Indeed, it usually does” (Taylor 1989, p. 9). In particular, orienting processes will generally take place at an intuitive or “gut” level (Taylor 1989, p. 5).

We understand existential meaning as an existentially colored version of what Park (2010) calls “global meaning”. Park uses this term for denoting our general orienting systems, which consist of beliefs, goals, and a subjective sense of purpose. Existential meaning and global meaning largely overlap. First, beliefs correspond with fundamental assumptions or views of reality that are tied up with our visions of the good. Second, goals are “internal representations of desired processes, events, or outcomes” (Park 2010, p. 258); these relate to visions of the good life. Goals do not correspond one-on-one to strongly valued visions of the good. These visions structure our desires and function as standards for determining our goals (Taylor 1989). In a hierarchical organization of goals, the “higher level goals determining midlevel and lower level goals” (Park 2010, p. 258) are probably the best candidates to represent strongly valued visions of the good. Finally, a subjective sense of purpose corresponds with the sense that we are actually moving towards strongly valued goods (Park 2013). So, this subjective sense of purpose corresponds with the believability of visions of the good with respect to our particular reality. Existential meaning and global meaning differ in the relative importance that is

² Strongly valued goods are, in the terminology of Taylor (1989), goods “that demand our awe, respect, or admiration” (p. 20). Strongly valued goods are not just desirable goods but the goods that function as standards in judging our choices, desires, and actions.

assigned to beliefs and goals. In global meaning, beliefs and goals seem to be regarded as separate and equally important, whereas in existential meaning beliefs are of importance insofar as they interrelate with our visions of the good life. This makes existential meaning a more explicitly moral concept than global meaning.

Reorientation after challenge: finding, losing, and restoring meaning in life

In terms of the spatial metaphor of moving in moral space, experiencing meaning in life depends on our position with respect to believable visions of the good. In Taylor's words, "We have to be rightly placed in relation to the good" (Taylor 1989, p. 44). This results in a gradual conception of meaning in life; we experience our life as more or less meaningful as we feel that we are positioned closer or further away from strongly valued visions of the good (Taylor 1989, p. 45). This makes it difficult to pinpoint precisely when we may speak of experiencing meaning in life. How close do we need to be to a strongly valued good in order to experience meaning in life? Do we need to be close to all goods that we cherish? Here, we also need to take into account that we live in time, that "we are always changing and *becoming*" (Taylor 1989, p. 47). Due to the temporal dimension of our lives, our place relative to crucial goods is "constantly challenged by the new events of our lives" (Taylor 1989, p. 47). Generally, this will not lead to serious disorientation and we will be able to adjust ourselves through slight reorientation. Existential questions will remain at the background, and orienting in moral space will remain an implicit and intuitive process that does not require reflection or articulation. In this case, we will continue to experience our life as meaningful. We will call such a process of keeping directed towards cherished visions of the good, involving no serious disorientation and only slight reorientation, a process of *finding meaning in life*. In particular, following Taylor's view that our agency is tied up with our ability to orient in moral space, processes of finding meaning in life are tied up with agency and do not involve a loss of agency.

Park (2010) uses the following terminology in her meaning-making model. She relates reorientation after a challenging event to the "appraised meaning" that we assign to the event. In general, there will be no serious discrepancy between appraised meaning and global meaning, so we are able to adjust easily. Our global meaning continues to work well in guiding us through life. When, however, the appraised meaning of an event is discrepant with a person's global meaning, this leads to distress. The distress initiates a process of meaning-making, an adaptive effort to reduce the discrepancy between appraised and global meaning. This involves either efforts at assimilation—changing appraised meaning—or efforts at accommodation—changing global meaning. Meaning-making efforts may be successful or unsuccessful, depending on the degree to which the discrepancy between appraised and global meaning is reduced (Park 2010, 2013). This is obviously not a sharp criterion, which means it is in line with meaningfulness as a gradual concept, as described earlier. When successful, the process of meaning-making results in meanings made, such as acceptance of the event, growth, changed global beliefs, or changed global goals (Park 2010).

When we are concerned with existential meaning, appraised meaning can be understood as our appraisal of the extent to which an event challenges the believability of our cherished visions of the good. This involves both the extent to which these visions disagree with our (possibly changed) beliefs about reality and the extent to which these visions disagree with our (possibly changed) perception of our particular life situation. We get disoriented in moral space

when there is serious discrepancy between appraised meaning (in this existential sense) and existential meaning. In that case, existential meaning no longer functions as an orienting system in moral space. We no longer know how to deal with certain existential questions and no longer experience life as meaningful; the process of finding meaning in life breaks down. Following the model of Park (2010), we may distinguish two ways in which we may successfully adapt and restore a process of finding meaning in life. We may either arrive at a new sense of the believability of our original visions of the good (assimilation) or we may orient towards new visions of the good that we find believable in the new situation (accommodation).

An existential perspective: ultimate goods and the uncertainty of finding meaning in life

According to existential theory, we are able to find meaning in life even when we are confronted with extremely challenging life events or circumstances (Frankl 1959). In other words we can, eventually, adapt to the most extreme adversity. We may at first get disoriented in moral space, when adversity challenges the believability of a valued vision of the good life. Disruptive events may shatter fundamental assumptions about reality that are tied up with our vision of the good (Janoff-Bulman 1992). Or, the vision is no longer perceived as believable due to a fundamental change in (our view of) the particular reality of our own individual life. We may, however, still commit ourselves to another good that is believable despite the disruptive event (Frankl 1959; Yalom 1980). Existential theory emphasizes that, eventually, we can commit ourselves to ultimate goods or purposes that are believable in all circumstances as they “can be maintained even in the face of the most degrading of circumstances” (Coward 2000, p. 160).³ For instance, we can still take a courageous attitude with respect to our suffering or we can still devote ourselves to the well-being of others.

Although the existential perspective emphasizes the possibility of finding meaning even in the most difficult circumstances, existential theory also points to the uncertainty of processes of meaning-making and finding meaning in life. This uncertainty is in the first place connected to the role of time in existential meaning. We already remarked that, as time passes, our position with respect to a good may change, so that a process of finding meaning in life involves continuous reorientation and may easily, at some point, fail. Furthermore, it may take time to find meaning; “finding meaning is not accomplished by a quick fix” (Reker and Chamberlain 2000, p. 12). A second factor in the uncertainty of finding meaning is our lack of complete control over the process. The terms “meaning making” and “meanings made” in Park’s (2010) model suggest that meaning is always actively created. However, meaning-making is not a purely deliberate process (Park 2010). Reker (2000) speaks of “the process of creating and/or discovering meaning” (p. 39). Finding meaning in life may even require letting go of control; “it is our nature to seek meaning, and yet this often involves a letting go, an ability to be vulnerable and receptive, and giving up control” (Reker and Chamberlain 2000, p. 12). Here, the metaphor of orientation is illustrative. When we are lost, we may regain orientation at unexpected moments and in unexpected ways, for instance, when we accidentally come across a place that we recognize and that helps us reorient. Furthermore, finding meaning in life may require that others—for instance, pastoral counselors—

³ When we perceive the ultimate good that we orient towards as sacred, searching for existential meaning may be understood as a spiritual quest (Pargament 2007).

support us in our meaning-making efforts (Frankl 1959; Yalom 1980). In terms of the metaphor of orientation, when we are lost, we may need others who can help us understand where we are in order to reorient.

Resilience: sustainability, recovery, and growth

Before we explore the connection between existential meaning and resilience, let us first go deeper into the concept of resilience. In *The Resilience Handbook* (Kent et al. 2014), resilience is understood as an adaptive response to challenge composed of three elements: “resilience as a sustained adaptive effort that prevails despite challenge, as a bouncing back and recovery from a challenge, and as a process of learning and growth that expands understanding, new knowledge, and new skills” (p. xii). These three elements are often denoted as sustainability, recovery, and growth (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004; Zautra 2009). Globally speaking, resilience refers to certain trajectories of change—or stability—in psychological functioning over time (Bonanno 2005; Bonanno and Mancini 2012). When we focus on each of the elements of resilience separately, we find somewhat different understandings of “challenge” and of (levels of) “psychological functioning” and different patterns of change/stability in levels of functioning over time.

Sustainability, the first element of resilience, is associated with a more chronically challenging situation instead of one isolated challenging event and is described as stability of the “capacity to pursue aims that give life meaning” (Zautra et al. 2010, p. 6). Here, good psychological functioning is not primarily understood in negative terms, as an absence of (psycho)pathology, but rather in positive terms, as having the possibility of leading a good, meaningful life (Zautra 2009; Zautra 2009).

Recovery is associated with an isolated disruptive event and refers to a process of returning to physiological and psychological equilibrium after the event (Zautra et al. 2010). Here, psychological functioning is primarily understood in terms of (physical and) mental health, in particular in terms of the absence of (psycho)pathology. However, several authors argue that a broad view of mental health—of health as more than just the absence of pathology and dysfunction—is necessary for understanding experiences of recovery (Bonanno et al. 2011; Zautra 2009). Recovery seems an ordinary, rather than an extraordinary, reaction to disruptive events that does not need much reflection (Zautra 2009). According to Bonanno (2005), the common reaction to potentially traumatic events is, in fact, “a relatively stable pattern of healthy functioning” (p. 135) in which there is no significant loss of equilibrium at all. In some literature, the term *resilience* is used exclusively for this stable pattern of functioning after a disruptive event and is thus distinguished from recovery (Bonanno 2005; Bonanno and Mancini 2012). When recovery is associated with a gradual return to baseline functioning over months or even years, the stable pattern may also involve some distress after the event, but during a shorter period (Westphal and Bonanno 2007). It is impossible to draw a clear line between recovery and a stable pattern as there is no clear distinction between temporal windows stretching over days or weeks and windows stretching over months or years. For the purposes of this article, we use the term *recovery* to refer to both a more gradual return to equilibrium and a relatively stable trajectory of maintaining mental health after an isolated disruptive event.

The third element of resilience, growth, reflects the idea, found in many religious and philosophical traditions, that suffering and struggle may lead to positive experiences (Park and

Helgeson 2006; Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). Growth may occur in the context of both a single disruptive event and more sustained challenge (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). In the literature on post-traumatic growth, psychological functioning is in the first place understood in terms of having “some useful, basic cognitive guides for living” (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004, p. 15). This understanding of functioning is similar to that in sustainability, where the capacity to pursue meaningful goals is emphasized. However, growth and sustainability represent different trajectories of functioning. Sustainability represents a trajectory without fundamental change in the capacity to pursue meaningful goals, whereas growth represents a trajectory in which certain fundamental assumptions or cherished goals are given up after trauma as they no longer function as appropriate guides for living. Only through struggling with the traumatic situation and through persistent cognitive processing may new schemas and new goals be established that allow for experiences of growth (Helgeson and Lopez 2010; Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004).

These three elements of resilience represent different pathways or appearances that need not occur simultaneously. This makes it complicated to speak of resilience in general and decide whether or not a process represents resilience. Another complicating factor is time. Resilience can only be recognized in hindsight, which raises the question of the time spans involved in resilience. Given the fact that recovery and especially growth—the most unpredictable of the different trajectories—may involve an indeterminate period of relatively poor functioning, it seems unclear at what point we may decide whether or not a process involving poor functioning represents a resilient trajectory, or, as Zautra asks, “Where does one draw the line at successful and resilient adaptation versus nonresilient responses?” (Zautra et al. 2010, p. 4).

Sustainability and growth as processes in moral space

The term resilience refers to adaptive processes during or following adversity that eventually lead to successful adjustment. Adversity challenges our (view of our) particular situation in life or our assumptions about reality in general (Janoff-Bulman 1992). As a result, adversity challenges the believability of our visions of the good life and, in particular, our orientation in what Taylor (1989) calls “moral space”. So, adaptive processes have a moral dimension of (re)orienting in moral space. Depending on whether or not adversity leads to disorientation in moral space, these adaptive processes in moral space do or do not involve meaning-making efforts. In order to understand the connection between existential meaning and resilience, we need to understand how adaptive processes in moral space relate to processes of resilience.

Looking at the three elements of resilience separately, we see that two of them—sustainability and growth—are associated with the spatial metaphor of orientation that figures so prominently in our conceptualization of existential meaning. Sustainability involves having “a direction of our own” (Zautra et al. 2010, p. 8) and is explicitly associated with “consideration of existential questions” (Zautra et al. 2010, p. 8). In sustainability, psychological functioning is understood primarily in terms of having the capacity of leading a good life. In other words, sustainability may be understood as a process in moral space; a process of finding meaning in life that continues despite ongoing challenge.

Something similar applies with respect to growth. Growth is associated with situations in which a person’s view of reality is “shattered” (Janoff-Bulman 1992). The person’s understanding of the world and his or her place in it is no longer valid, which leads to cognitive processing (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004), or, in terms of the model of Park (2010), to meaning-

making efforts. This may well involve “event-related rumination” (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004, p. 9), which explains why PTSD and growth are sometimes found to be related (Park and Helgeson 2006; Westphal and Bonanno 2007). Growth occurs when, at some point, the trauma survivor disengages from certain goals or views of reality and eventually manages “to formulate new goals and worldviews that allow a perception that one is moving forward again towards goals in a world that permits this” (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004, p. 10). Here, we almost literally find the notions of orientation in moral space and of believability. So, like sustainability, post-traumatic growth may be understood as an adaptive process in moral space. It is a process of at first losing direction—giving up on some idea of the good life that is no longer believable—then struggling with the loss of direction, and eventually managing to direct towards a new conception of the good life that obtains believability and value from the traumatic event. This does not imply that the trauma itself is now seen as desirable or that some good is now found in the event itself but that the event is perceived as leading to some good that somehow outweighs the good that was given up (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2004). Like sustainability, growth comprises finding meaning in life; unlike sustainability, growth also comprises at first struggling for meaning in life.

Finding meaning in life as a central dimension of recovery

Unlike sustainability and growth, recovery—the third element of resilience—does not, almost by definition, refer to a process in moral space. In recovery, psychological functioning is understood in terms of physiological and psychological equilibrium and (mental) health. Still, recovery is often associated with meaning: “Meaning is particularly important when individuals confront highly stressful and traumatic life experiences” (Park 2013, p. 61). Generally, meaning is even considered to be crucial in recovery (Janoff-Bulman 1992; Park 2013). There is, however, controversy about the precise connection between recovery and meaning (Bonanno 2013; Mancini and Bonanno 2010). Several recent studies suggest that meaning does not play a significant role in recovery or even that there is a negative connection between meaning and recovery (Bonanno 2013). First, many people turn out to cope well with potentially traumatic events without engaging in meaning-making efforts (Silver and Updegraff 2013; Westphal and Bonanno 2007). Second, when people engage in meaning-making after a traumatic event, this is often maladaptive and associated with depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms (Bonanno et al. 2004; Sales et al. 2013; Silver and Updegraff 2013; Waters et al. 2013). Finally, the assumption that “finding meaning is necessary for successful adjustment” (Bonanno 2013) has also been challenged (Sales et al. 2013; Silver and Updegraff 2013). We now explore how to understand these studies and statements with a view to *existential* meaning.

In the first place, when people do not engage in meaning-making efforts after a potentially traumatic event, we would conclude that there is no significant discrepancy between the appraised meaning of the event and the global meaning (Park 2010). In our view, when people cope well without engaging in meaning-making efforts, this does not question the connection between existential meaning and recovery but shows that a stable pattern of functioning after a disruptive event comprises a stable process of finding meaning in life. Second, when people engage in meaning-making efforts after a disruptive event, we would conclude that there is a significant discrepancy between the appraised and the global meaning. According to Park (2010), these efforts will be maladaptive when they do not lead to reduction in discrepancy. In

this view, it is not surprising that (sustained) meaning-making is often negatively connected with recovery. Studies in this area generally fail to “examine the critical core of the meaning making model, discrepancy” (Park 2013, p. 69). So, these studies are not conclusive with respect to meaning-making efforts that eventually result in reduction of discrepancy (Park 2013). We may still conclude that when a disruptive event leads to meaning-making efforts, recovery requires that at some point meaning-making efforts result in reducing discrepancy and in meanings made (Park 2013) and, from an existential viewpoint, in finding meaning in life.

Third, there are studies that go even further and not only challenge a positive connection between meaning-making and recovery but even between finding meaning and recovery. These studies are discussed by Bonanno (2013) and Silver and Updegraff (2013). A precise reading of this discussion shows that in these studies, finding meaning is understood as finding meaning *in* a traumatic event (Bonanno 2013; Silver and Updegraff 2013). Here, meaning is understood primarily in terms of comprehensibility, as making sense of an event (Bonanno 2013; Silver and Updegraff 2013). For instance, Sales et al. (2013) understand searching for meaning in narrative terms as a process of looking back and trying to fit a traumatizing event into a life story. Although these studies challenge the connection between recovery and finding meaning in an event, they are not concerned with *existential* meaning and finding meaning *in life*, since existential meaning does not primarily depend on comprehensibility of events. Sales et al. (2013) argue that sometimes “it may be more adaptive to simply move forward and assume one can change the future rather than try to make sense of a past that may simply be senseless” (p. 106). Actually, this statement supports the claim that *existential* meaning is connected with recovery: it may be more adaptive to move towards a believable vision of the good life rather than try to find a comprehensible explanation of a traumatic event. Similarly, Janoff-Bulman and Frantz (1997) argue that successful adjustment after a disruptive event does not depend on solving questions concerning comprehensibility of the event but on finding significance and value in one’s life—not necessarily in the disruptive event.

So, we agree with Bonanno (2013) and Silver and Updegraff (2013) that certain studies prove that there may be a negative connection between recovery and finding meaning, but we also conclude that these studies do not involve the existential notion of finding meaning in life. In particular, the literature on resilience still allows us to conclude that successful adjustment requires eventually reorienting towards a believable vision of the good. In other words, recovery has a moral dimension that is a process of eventually finding meaning in life. This connection between recovery and existential meaning differs from that between growth and existential meaning discussed earlier; although growth implies that the vision of the good life towards which we (eventually) orient obtains significance from the traumatic event, this is not necessary for recovery.

When we look at the role of agency in recovery, we may even conclude that the moral dimension is central in recovery. According to Kent and Davis (2014), agency is the crucial factor in recovery. They propose that “PTSD is fundamentally a disorder of action and agency” (Kent and Davis 2014, p. 234). Recovery from trauma requires in the first place restoration of agency (Kent and Davis 2014). Earlier it was mentioned that, according to Taylor (1989), we have agency when we have some orientation towards a strongly valued good that gives us an idea where to go (p. 33). In this view, recovery from trauma requires in the first place restoration of a believable idea of the good. This is reflected by the statement of Kent and Davis (2014) that “restoring the diminished capacities of action and agency . . . brings with it a prospective future and goal-directed orientation” (p. 241). Actually, Kent and Davis developed

a resilience training program for people suffering from PTSD, in which the last step consists of asking participants the question “What is a good life?” and encouraging them to imagine a future in which they live this good life (Kent and Davis 2014). In particular, Kent and Davis connect recovery with orienting towards a believable vision of the good life, a vision that people can imagine someday integrating in their life.

Conclusion and discussion

According to Taylor (1989), orienting in moral space is the central feature of human existence. This suggests that adaptive processes of reorientation in moral space constitute a central dimension of adaptive processes in general and, in particular, that existential meaning plays a central role in resilience. Our exploration of recent literature on resilience supports this suggestion. From the explorations in this paper we conclude that all three pathways of resilience—sustainability, growth, and recovery—necessarily comprise, as a moral dimension, a process of (eventually) finding meaning in life. In order to speak of a resilient process, people need to feel that they are, from some point in the process onwards, directing towards a believable vision of the good life. This vision needs to agree with their (possibly changed) beliefs about reality, and they need to feel that this vision can be integrated in their life, given their (possibly changed) life circumstances. In order to further underpin this conclusion, more research—especially empirical research—is required. Therefore, it is important to find ways to empirically assess the notion of “orienting towards believable visions of the good”. Here personal narratives seem a suitable starting point. According to Taylor (1989), “We grasp our lives *in a narrative*” (p. 47). And Bonanno (2013) states that narrative analysis offers a “window on the meaning-making process” (p. 150). In order to assess existential meaning in personal narratives, we need subtle, specific forms of narrative analysis that do not focus on the comprehensibility of an event but on the believability of cherished visions of the good that appear in personal narratives.

Our explorations confirm the idea that pastoral counselors, as professionals in the area of existential meaning, have a central role to play in promoting resilience. Pastoral counselors are concerned with existential meaning—with adaptive processes in moral space. This implies that they are concerned with the moral dimension of resilience processes, which is, as discussed above, central in these processes. When we look at the implications of the ideas in this article for the role of pastoral counselors with respect to resilience, two things stand out. In the first place, pastoral counselors represent the hopeful perspective that a meaningful life is possible, even in the most difficult circumstances (Capps 1995; Drescher and Foy 2010; Peres et al. 2007). Whether they work from a specific religious framework or from a spiritual or an existential inspiration, they represent visions of the good that transcend the misery and evil of particular situations (Murdoch 1970; Slife and Richardson 2014). These are visions that remain believable when fundamental assumptions—beliefs that the world is a just place or that we are in control of our lives—are shattered (Janoff-Bulman 1992). At the same time, as counseling professionals, pastoral counselors are attuned to the individual life situations of their clients. They are careful not to prescribe their own visions of the good but to cooperate with clients in finding out which visions of the good are believable to the clients themselves with respect to their particular life circumstances (Doehring 2014; Lynch 2002). In this way, they help clients to strengthen or restore their sense of agency. This attentiveness to the particularity of each client seems especially important in our complex, globalizing world, where a multitude of different visions of the good are available (Schuhmann 2016).

Therefore, the role of pastoral counselors seems important in resilience-building interventions both before and after exposure to trauma, especially when these interventions are not tailored to the individual circumstances of participants. Clearly, more research is needed in order to further clarify the resilience-building role of pastoral counselors.

In the second place, pastoral counselors have a critical role to play in organizations in which the resilience of employees is a central issue, such as police departments or the military. When the moral dimension of resilience is emphasized, the uncertainty, unpredictability, uncontrollability, and individuality of resilience processes come to the fore. Pastoral counselors represent this “existential perspective” on resilience; they know, for instance, that recovery may be a slow, difficult process and that PTSD may eventually evolve into post-traumatic growth. In this existential perspective on resilience, people cannot simply be trained to become resilient.⁴ Furthermore, there are no uniform recipes or time schedules for recovery after trauma. The existential perspective represented by pastoral counselors provides a counterweight against visions of resilience as trainable, controllable, or fitting within given time schemes, which may be dominant in organizations.

At the organizational level, the critical role of pastoral counselors also concerns dominant images of the good life and especially “the good professional” that exist in organizations. This reflects a view of pastoral counseling as having a political dimension (LaMothe 2014). In a police department, for instance, the dominant image of the good police officer features being strong and always in control (Papazoglou and Andersen 2014; Smith and Charles 2010). Traumatic events, however, are “by their nature, dangerous, frightening, unpredictable, and uncontrollable” (Drescher and Foy 2010, p. 148). In potentially traumatic situations, it is likely that police officers will not always manage to live up to the image of being strong and in control. Traumatic events may easily shatter the believability of this image. Pastoral counselors represent the view that vulnerability is an inevitable element of life and that struggling with life and life events is not in itself pathological. In organizations whose employees are regularly confronted with potentially traumatic events, creating space for dialogue about the role of vulnerability in good work might, paradoxically, be crucial in promoting the resilience of employees. Here, pastoral counselors have a unique contribution to make.

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⁴ Bonanno et al. (2011) warn against stigmatizing people who experience mental health problems after trauma as a potential unintended effect of preventive resilience training.

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