

Adolescent Turning Points: The Association Between Meaning-Making and Psychological Well-Being

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Research findings indicate that the ability to create meaning out of turning points (i.e., significant life experiences) is related to psychological well-being. It is not clear, however, whether individuals who report meaning-making and higher well-being are better adjusted *prior* to the experience of their turning point event. This study examined whether meaning-making and timing of turning points would be associated with higher scores on well-being. Participants were 418 Grade 12 students (209 of whom reported having had a turning point event and a matched group of 209 adolescents who did not report having had a turning point event). This subset of participants was taken from a larger longitudinal study of 803 (52% female) Grade 12 Canadian students (M age = 17 years). All participants completed well-being measures 3 years prior, when they were in Grade 9. Meaning-making was significantly associated with higher psychological well-being, controlling for Grade 9 scores on well-being. Importantly, adolescents who reported meaning-making in Grade 12 did not differ on well-being *prior* to the experience of their turning point event, when they were in Grade 9, from adolescents who did not report meaning-making. These findings highlight the importance of examining meaning-making in relation to positive adjustment among adolescents reporting a significant life-changing event. Limitations regarding the use of survey measures and the generalizability of the results to a culturally diverse group of adolescents are discussed.

Keywords: meaning-making, turning points, psychological well-being, high school adolescents

Adolescence represents a period of exploration and vulnerability (Erikson, 1968), in which individuals are exposed to myriad of potentially life-altering experiences. Such life-altering experiences or turning points are perceived focal points of change in one's life (Pillemer, 2001). The term meaning-making refers to the process by which individuals make sense out of their turning points (McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean & Pratt, 2006). Importantly, meaning-making tends to be associated with more positive adjustment (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). The purpose of this study was to examine whether meaning-making within turning point narratives, as well as the timing of these turning points, would be associated with psychological well-being among a sample of Grade 12 high school adolescents. The present study extended past research in this area by (a) including a high school sample, rather than the more typical university samples used in other studies; (b) accounting for possible pre-existing differences on well-being between adolescents who later reported meaning-making and those who did not report meaning-making *prior* to adolescents' experience of their turning point event; and (c) examining whether the association between

meaning-making and well-being varied as a function of the timing of the turning point.

The present study is situated within the theoretical framework of McAdams's (1985) life story model of identity, which posits that one's identity is demonstrated through the construction of a life story. The life story, a detailed narrative account of one's life experiences, goes beyond the mere retelling of past events and represents the subjective interpretation of the individual's life events (McAdams, 2001). In other words, the life story comes equipped with a carefully selected set of characters, setting, plot, and themes, which reflect personality differences (McAdams et al., 2006; Sutin, Costa, Wethington, & Eaton, 2010b), variability in cognitive style (Steger, Kashdan, Sullivan, & Lorentz, 2008), and psychological functioning (McAdams et al., 2001). Although the life story comprises multiple chapters such as high points, low points, and earliest memories, many researchers have focused on assessing how individuals narrate significant life experiences or turning points (McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean & Pratt, 2006). The current study specifically focuses on this component of the life story: turning points.

Turning points are specific events that are perceived to alter the normal flow and direction of one's life (Pillemer, 2001). These events are regarded as significant life experiences as individuals attribute changes in their behaviors and attitudes to these events. It is important to note that turning points may vary in valence (negative or positive), severity, and duration across individuals. The most defining characteristic of a turning point, however, remains that the event is perceived as significant or life-changing to the individual (Pillemer, 2001). Some types of turning points include experiences relating to relationships (falling in love or

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breaking up), travel (mission trips), bereavement (loss of a loved one), and achievement (getting accepted into university). Thorne, McLean, and Lawrence (2004) suggested that experiences relating to bereavement are one of the most prevalent types of self-defining memories, a concept similar to our definition of turning points. Additionally, some events may provide more opportunities for self-reflection than others and, thus, give way to meaning-making. For example, McLean and Pratt (2006) found that meaning-making scores were significantly higher among individuals who reported mortality events as turning points compared with individuals who reported achievement events. Furthermore, meaning-making was more prevalent among life events characterized by high tension and conflict relative to events that did not contain conflict (Thorne et al., 2004).

Meaning-Making and Psychological Well-Being

In addition to documenting the types of experiences that are deemed turning point events, researchers have become increasingly interested in examining how various components of meaning-making may be associated with psychological well-being (Gangstad, Norman, & Barton, 2009; Pals, 2006; Sutin, Costa, Wethington, & Eaton, 2010a). For example, researchers have explored concepts related to meaning-making, such as *redemption* and *cognitive transformation*. Both redemption and cognitive transformation refer to the ability to draw some form of positive affect from a negative life experience. In a study on life stories and adaptation with a sample of students (18 to 24 years) and adults (35 to 65 years), McAdams et al. (2001) found that individuals who displayed redemption within their life narratives fared better psychologically and were more satisfied with life, relative to individuals who did not report redemption within their life stories (see also McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008). Furthermore, Tebes, Irish, Vasquez, and Perkins (2004) examined the relation between cognitive transformation and adaptation with a group of 18- to 35-year-old bereaved adults who had lost a parent within the past 2 years. Results showed that cognitive transformers reported fewer psychiatric symptoms and higher levels of grief and trauma resolution compared with cognitive nontransformers (i.e., individuals who did not report some positive outcome from their bereavement). These findings indicate that bereaved adults who reported meaning were also better psychologically adjusted than adults who reported no meaning.

Furthermore, the narrating of life experiences may act as a tool for facilitating psychological well-being (McAdams, 2001; McLean, Breen, & Fournier, 2010; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996). Narrating difficult or negative life experiences may allow for a restored sense of identity (Michael & Snyder, 2005) and for the possibility of restoring a sense of coherence and meaning in life (McAdams et al., 2001). For example, Pals (2006) found that participants who narrated a difficult life experience with a sense of positive coherence and closure concurrently reported higher scores on ego-resiliency (defined as the ability to maintain positivity and adapt effectively in the face of adversity). King and Illicks (2009) also found that reporting meaning (within the context of both trivial and major life events) was a significant positive predictor of psychological well-being.

Although the general consensus in the literature seems to be that individuals who report meaning-making tend to fare better psy-

chologically compared with those who do not report meaning-making, some studies offer conflicting findings (see McLean & Mansfield, 2010; Sutin et al., 2010a). In one study, Michael and Snyder (2005) found that among a US sample of college students ($M_{age} = 19$ years) who had lost a loved one over a year prior to the time of the study, finding benefit in the loss was significantly related to higher levels of rumination. Rumination has been construed as an ineffective form of coping with stressful life events, whereby individuals continuously process the negative aspects of an experience without constructing any adaptive strategies to alleviate psychological distress (Michael & Snyder, 2005). Furthermore, in a recent study with a sample of adolescent boys aged 11 to 18 years, results showed that there was a positive association between meaning-making and psychological well-being among late adolescent boys, but not among early adolescent boys (McLean et al., 2010). McLean and Mansfield (2010) cautioned that within some contexts (e.g., at-risk youths who choose to narrate their lives in light of their present and possible future life events, as opposed to their past life events), attempts at narrating past events into a coherent life story may be detrimental to psychological well-being. More research examining potential factors that may moderate the association between meaning-making and psychological well-being is warranted.

Furthermore, an important limitation of the studies examining the relation between meaning-making and well-being is that it is not clear whether individuals who report meaning-making and higher well-being were already better (or worse) adjusted *prior* to the experience of their turning point. To account for possible preexisting differences on indicators of positive adjustment, it is necessary also to assess participants' well-being before their turning point experience. Studies assessing meaning-making and well-being, however, have been predominately cross-sectional, and therefore, to the best of our knowledge, no study has yet addressed this question. For example, McLean and Breen (2009) found that redemption within narratives was positively related to adolescents' self-esteem with a US sample of 14- to 18-year-olds, but given the cross-sectional nature of the study, it is not clear whether the adolescents who reported both redemption within their turning points and higher self-esteem may have had higher self-esteem well before their turning point, which may have contributed to their positive interpretation of the negative event. In one longitudinal study, McLean and Pratt (2006) examined the association between meaning-making (at age 23 years) and identity development (at ages 17, 19, and 23 years) with a sample of adolescents. The turning point question (from which meaning-making was coded) was only assessed when participants were 23 years old. Results of this study indicated a significant relation between meaning-making and optimism at age 23, but interestingly, meaning-making (at age 23) was not significantly related to optimism at ages 17 and 19 years. The authors, however, did not report the timing of the occurrence of participants' turning points, so we do not know whether participants' turning points occurred prior to or after age 17, when they began the study. Therefore, it remains unclear whether individuals who reported meaning-making from their turning points, and concurrently reported higher optimism at age 23, were individuals who were already high on optimism to begin with, prior to their turning point.

Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, and Larson (1998) found that making sense of the loss of a loved one and finding something positive in

the experience were related to lower levels of depressive symptoms, when controlling for depressive symptoms prior to the loss. The findings of this study may not necessarily be generalizable to turning points, however, given that (a) it is not clear the individuals perceived the loss as a turning point; (b) the study involved a select sample of individuals recruited through hospices who, therefore, anticipated the loss when assessed at the first time point; and (c) the study was specific to bereavement. To address this gap, we assessed participants' timing of their turning points and thus were able to account for possible preexisting differences on well-being between adolescents who later reported meaning-making and those who did not report meaning-making.

Timing of Turning Point

Meaning-making may hold important implications for adjustment following a significant life experience. It is possible, however, that individuals may be more likely to report higher scores on adjustment simply as a function of the passage of time subsequent to a turning point event. In other words, the timing of a turning point may be associated with adjustment, independent of meaning-making. Furthermore, there could be an interaction between meaning-making and timing of the turning point, such that any relation of meaning-making to adjustment may vary as a function of the timing of the turning point. Michael and Snyder (2005) examined the association between finding meaning (defined as *sense-making* and *benefit-finding*) and psychological well-being between two groups of college students: those who had experienced a loss within the past year at the time of the study (acute group) and those who had lost someone more than a year ago at the time of the study (prolonged group). For both the acute and prolonged group, sense-making was associated with higher well-being. In addition, for the acute group, finding benefit from the loss was significantly associated with lower anxiety and less depressive symptoms. Within the prolonged group, however, students who reported finding some benefit from their loss reported more depressive symptoms. The authors speculated that benefit finding in the prolonged group may be related to continued rumination over time and, therefore, linked to less positive well-being (however, see Davis et al., 1998, who found that benefit finding over a prolonged time [13 and 18 months] was related to positive adjustment). These findings suggest that the timing of a significant life event may, in fact, moderate the relation between finding meaning and indices of psychological adjustment. Furthermore, authors have noted the need to account for time effects when assessing individuals' adjustment to turning points (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Sutin et al., 2010a). In the present study, therefore, we examined the main effect of timing as well as the interaction between meaning-making and timing of the turning point on psychological well-being.

The Present Study

The present study addressed several gaps in the research literature examining meaning-making and adjustment. First, although there is some research linking meaning-making and psychological well-being among preadolescent, emerging, and older adult samples, research on high school adolescents is lacking. Researchers agree that the ability to construct meaning from life events tends to

emerge during late adolescence into early adulthood (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & de Silveira, 2008; McAdams, 1985; McLean & Thorne, 2003). For example, McLean and Breen (2009) examined age differences in meaning-making with a sample of 14- to 18-year olds and found that the highest level of meaning-making was between mid- and late adolescence or when adolescents were between 16 and 17 years old. The majority of studies that explore meaning-making among adolescents, however, have relied on select groups of individuals (generally college or post-college samples; McLean, 2005; Thorne et al., 2004; but see McLean et al., 2010, and Reese, Yan, Jack, & Hayne, 2010, for exceptions). In the present study, we examined meaning-making and the timing of turning points with a more representative sample of Grade 12 high school adolescents.

Second, a critical component of the present study was its longitudinal design, resulting in the ability to account for possible preexisting differences on well-being prior to adolescents' turning point events. Third, we explored the possibility of an interaction between meaning-making and the timing of turning point on psychological well-being to determine whether any significant associations between meaning-making and well-being would vary as a function of the timing of the turning point event. Finally, age, gender, parental education, and Canadian-born status were included as covariates in all analyses, given that past research suggests that these factors may be associated with well-being among emerging adults (for e.g., Kerr & Stattin, 2000).¹ The present study specifically addressed three research questions:

Research Question 1: Is Meaning-Making and Timing of the Turning Point Significantly Associated With Psychological Well-Being in Grade 12?

We hypothesized, based on past literature (see McAdams et al., 2001; McLean & Lilgendahl, 2008; Tebes et al., 2004), that meaning-making (assessed in Grade 12) would be significantly associated with more positive psychological well-being in Grade 12, controlling for Grade 9 scores on this measure. The investigation of the timing of the turning point, as well as the interaction between meaning-making and the timing of the turning point, were exploratory as these associations have not yet been explicitly examined within the context of Grade 12 adolescent turning point events.

Research Question 2: Is There a Significant Difference Between Adolescents Who Reported Meaning-Making and Those Who Did Not Report Meaning-Making on Psychological Well-Being Prior to the Experience of Their Turning Point, When Participants Were in Grade 9?

As we had access to the participants' Grade 9 scores on well-being, to address this research question, we selected the subset of participants who had experienced their turning point within the past 2 years (i.e., in Grade 10 or later), such that their Grade 9

¹ We also examined whether gender would act as a moderator of the results. Results revealed no significant moderating effect for gender (results can be obtained from the first author).

assessment would reflect scores on well-being *prior* to their turning point. Past literature suggests that individuals' psychological well-being may be enhanced through meaning-making (McAdams et al., 2001). If this theory holds true, then we would expect no significant difference on psychological well-being between adolescents who reported meaning-making and adolescents who reported no meaning-making *prior* to their turning point event.

Research Question 3: Is the Reported Experience of a Turning Point Event Significantly Associated With Psychological Well-Being?

DeLongis, Coyne, Dakof, Folkman, and Lazarus (1982) found that hassles (defined as the subjective interpretation of an event as distressful) was a stronger predictor of health outcomes than life event scores (i.e., the number of significant life events). Additionally, other researchers have found it useful to move past the occurrence or number of significant life events and assess the valence, intensity, and centrality of life events to one's identity—as subjectively experienced by the individual—in relation to one's subsequent adjustment (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006; King & Ilicks, 2009; Smyth, Hockemeyer, Heron, Wonderlich, & Pennebaker, 2008). For these reasons, we projected no directional hypothesis for a main effect of turning point versus no turning point experience on psychological well-being. Therefore, although we expected that meaning-making within turning point narratives would be significantly positively associated with well-being, we did not expect that the reported experience of a turning point would be significantly associated with well-being.

Method

Participants

Students from eight high schools encompassing a school district in southern Ontario, Canada took part in the study. This study was part of a larger longitudinal-sequential project examining youth lifestyle choices across the high school years (e.g., see Willoughby, Adachi, & Good, 2011; Willoughby & Hamza, 2011). In the larger study, surveys were completed several times between 2003 and 2008, with some students starting the study in 2003 and others joining the study in subsequent years. This larger sample comprised 803 students (52% female) who completed the survey when they were in Grade 12 (*Age* = 17 years, 3 months), as the turning point question was only included in the survey conducted in 2008. The current analyses are based on a smaller subset of participants (*N* = 418), who were further broken down into two groups: adolescents who reported having experienced a turning point event (*N* = 209) and a matched group of adolescents from the larger sample who did not report a turning point event (*N* = 209). The overall participation rate for students was 85% in 2008; nonparticipation was due to student absenteeism (14%), parental refusal (0.01%), or student refusal (1%). Consistent with the broader Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2001), 92% of the participants were born in Canada and the most common ethnic backgrounds reported other than Canadian were Italian (31%), French (18%), British (15%), and German (12%). Data on socioeconomic status indicated mean parental levels of education falling between “some college, university, or apprenticeship program”

and “completed a college/apprenticeship/technical diploma.” Furthermore, 70% of the respondents reported living with both birth parents, 12% with one birth parent and a stepparent, 15% with one birth parent (mother or father only), and the remainder with neither parent (e.g., other relatives, foster parents).

Procedure

Active informed consent was obtained from the adolescent participants. Parents were provided with written correspondence mailed to each student's home prior to the survey administration outlining the study; this letter indicated that parents could request that their adolescent not participate in the study. An automated phone message about the study also was left at each student's home phone number. This procedure was approved by the participating school board and the University Research Ethics Board. At all time periods, the questionnaire was administered to students in classrooms by trained research staff. Students were informed that their responses were completely confidential.

Measures

The turning point question, which elicited turning point narratives, was posed only when participants were in Grade 12. All participants also completed a questionnaire that assessed demographics and psychological well-being when they were in Grade 12. As part of the longitudinal study, we also were able to access participants' scores on psychological well-being when they were in Grade 9. See Table 1 for descriptive information about the measures.

Demographics. Participants completed a demographics form which assessed age, gender, parental education for both mother and father, and Canadian-born status (i.e., whether participants were born in Canada).

Turning points. The following open-ended question was posed to all participants: “Have you ever experienced a major turning point in your life that changed the way you thought about something or how you behaved? If yes, what was the turning point?”

Timing of turning point. Participants were asked, “How old were you when that turning point happened?” Responses to this question indicated the amount of time (in years) since the turning point occurred (0 = *within the past year*, 1 = *1 year ago*, 2 = *2 years ago*, etc.).

Psychological well-being. A composite measure was computed that comprised the following four scales of psychological well-being: (a) Depression—the 20-item Center for Epidemiological Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) was used to assess the degree of depressive symptoms adolescents experienced over the past 2 weeks (e.g., “I thought my life had been a failure”); (b) Social Anxiety—the 14-item Social Anxiety-related symptoms scale (Ginsburg, LaGreca, & Silverman, 1998) was used to assess the frequency of social anxiety-related symptoms experienced by adolescents (e.g., “I'm quiet when I'm with a group of people my age”); (c) Self-Esteem—the 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) assessed the degree to which adolescents agreed with a list of statements relating to their self-worth (e.g., “I feel useless at times”; reverse coded); and (d) Daily Hassles—participants indicated the frequency of experiencing a 21-item list

Table 1
Summary of Measures for Grade 9 and Grade 12

Variable	Measure	Items	Scale Range	Grade 9		Grade 12	
				α	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	α	<i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)
Age	Age	1	N/A		14 years, 1 month		17 years, 5 months
Gender	Gender	1	1 (male) or 2 (female)		57% Female		57% Female
Parental education	Educational Attainment	2	1 (did not finish high school) to 6 (completed a university undergraduate degree)		3.41 (1.48)		
Canadian-born status	Were you born in Canada?	1	1 (yes) 2 (no)		88% Canadian		88% Canadian
Psychological well-being	Daily hassles	20	1 (almost never bothers me) to 3 (often bothers me)	.80	1.78 (0.28)	.90	1.86 (0.37)
	Self-esteem	10	1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree)	.91	2.14 (0.65)	.89	2.26 (0.71)
	Social anxiety	14	1 (almost never or never) to 4 (almost always or always)	.90	1.74 (0.47)	.92	1.75 (0.51)
	Depression	20	1 (none of the time) to 5 (most of the time)	.85	1.88 (0.53)	.94	2.21 (0.72)

Note. $N = 209$ adolescents who reported a turning point event. Higher scores on psychological well-being variables indicate more daily hassles, lower self-esteem, more anxiety, and more depressive symptoms.

of daily hassles with friends, peers, school, etc. (e.g., “problems with friends”; scale was developed for the research project from which the data used in the present article were drawn). For each of the four scales, an average score for all the items in the scale was created and then standardized. The four standardized scores then were averaged together into a composite psychological well-being score (supported by exploratory factor analyses revealing one factor for the four scales in both Grade 9 and Grade 12, with no factor score lower than .70), such that higher composite scores indicate higher psychological well-being.

Coding of Turning Points

Turning points. Coding for turning point events was adapted from McLean and Pratt’s (2006) turning point event type categories. Seven turning point event categories emerged from participants’ responses (see Table 2): *relationship events* (interpersonal encounters or conflicts with friends/peers/family members, changes in intimate relationships), *travel events* (actual travel experiences abroad with the opportunity to experience a foreign culture), *moving events* (events that related to one’s permanent relocation in a different place, whether as an individual or with family, including moving to a different city or country), *mortality/life-threatening events* (events pertaining to bereavement, illness, accidents, near-death experiences of the individual or that of others), and *educational events* (events relating to academics including concerns about grades, decisions regarding career choices or university plans). Responses that were too vague or did not contain a specific event were coded as *no event*, whereas responses that comprised a specific event that did not fit into one of the above categories were coded as *other events* (such as spirituality, concerns about pregnancy, trouble with the law, and drug experimentation).

Meaning-making. Coding for meaning-making was based on McLean and Thorne’s (2001) coding scheme. The authors differentiate between two types of meaning-making: lessons and insights. Lesson refers to the learning of socially acceptable ways of behavior, whereas insight refers to responses in which there is evidence of perceived global change in attitudes toward life. Meaning-making was first coded in the present study as 0 = no meaning-making, 1 = lesson, and 2 = insight, but results of preliminary analyses showed that participants who reported lessons did not differ significantly on well-being, compared with participants who reported insights. These two categories, therefore, were combined for all analyses, with adolescents who reported either a lesson or an insight within their turning point narrative receiving a score of 1 for meaning-making and adolescents who reported neither lesson nor insight within their turning points receiving a score of 0.

To assess inter-rater reliability for the coding of both turning points and meaning-making, of the 209 reported turning point narratives, 20% ($N = 43$) were coded by the first author and an independent rater. Narratives were coded first for type of event based on the following coding scheme: 1 = relationship events, 2 = travel events, 3 = moving events 4 = mortality/life-threatening events, 5 = educational events, 6 = other events (such as spiritual or trouble with the law), and 7 = not applicable (i.e., events that were too vague). Meaning-making was coded based on the following coding scheme: 0 = no meaning-making, 1 = lesson

Table 2
 Descriptions of Subcategories, Examples, and Prevalence of Turning Point Event Type and Meaning-Making Categories

Category	Example	Prevalence
Turning point event type		
Relationship events		
Interpersonal encounters or conflicts with friends, family members; changes in relationships and family structure	"Meeting my best friend made me a more outgoing person, I enjoy life a lot more."	47 (23%)
Travel events		
Travel experiences; exposure to a different culture/country	"Going to the Dominican to do development work."	9 (4%)
Moving events		
Permanent relocation in a different place either alone or with family	"Moving to another country—different place, mix of cultures, felt very strange and mistrustful."	9 (4%)
Mortality/life-threatening events		
Illness, accidents, bereavement, near-death/ life threatening experiences either to the individual or others	"My close friend passed away a year ago and it has opened my eyes and I have matured. I am very thankful for what I have."	56 (27%)
Educational events		
Academic experiences, a specific class, concerns about grades, decisions regarding career and university choices	"Physics class—changed my outlook on engineering to a business degree."	13 (6%)
Other		
Trouble with the law, drugs, spirituality	"I got arrested for prostitution."	24 (12%)
No event		
No specific events; too vague/unclear	"Not sure"; "High school"	51 (24%)
Meaning-making type		
Lesson		
Change in a specific behavior towards a specific event	"My mum died in a car accident. A drunk driver killed her. I do not drink anymore."	17 (8%)
Insight		
Emotional or psychological transformation; global, abstract change in attitude or behavior towards others, or life in general	"My mum got sick and made me appreciate my loved ones more."	59 (28%)
No meaning		
No lesson or insight; turning point event merely stated	"When my parents got divorced."	133 (64%)

Note. $N = 209$ adolescents who reported a turning point event.

or insight. Inter-rater reliability was excellent (Cohen's $\kappa = .89$, $p < .001$, for turning point event, and $.78$, $p < .001$, for meaning-making). The remaining narratives were coded by the first author.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Overall, approximately 26% ($N = 209$) of the larger sample of Grade 12 adolescents reported having had a turning point experience at the time of the survey (57% female, $M = 17$ years, 4 months, $SD = 0.49$). The majority of participants, 64%, reported that their turning point occurred within the past 2 years, 28% reported that their turning point occurred more than 2 years ago, and 8% did not indicate the timing of their turning point. There was a significant correlation between meaning-making and psychological well-being ($r = .15$, $p < .05$). Timing of turning points was not significantly correlated with well-being ($r = -.09$, $p > .05$) or with meaning-making ($r = -.10$, $p > .05$). Prevalence of the various types of turning points, as well as meaning-making categories, are presented in Table 2. Relationship and mortality events were the most prevalent types of turning point events reported for both men (21% relationship and 20% mortality) and women (24% relationship and 35% mortality). Among participants who reported

a turning point, 36% reported meaning-making (32% of men and 40% of women), and 64% reported no meaning-making.

Research Question 1: Is Meaning-Making and Timing of the Turning Point Significantly Associated With Psychological Well-Being in Grade 12?

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine the role of meaning-making and timing of the turning point on psychological well-being in Grade 12: In Step 1, participants' Grade 9 scores on psychological well-being were entered, and in Step 2, the covariates of age, gender, parent education, and Canadian-born status were added. In Step 3, meaning-making and timing of the turning point were added as predictors, and finally, in Step 4, the interaction between meaning-making and timing of the turning point was added to examine whether any association between meaning-making and psychological well-being was dependent on the timing of the turning point. Results of this analysis are presented in Table 3. Overall, participants' Grade 9 scores on psychological well-being, entered at Step 1, were significantly associated with higher Grade 12 well-being. The covariates, entered in Step 2, did not add any significant predictive value to the model. Consistent with our hypothesis, Step 3 was significant. However, only meaning-making, but not timing of turning point, was significantly associated with well-being in Grade 12, such that

Table 3
Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Psychological Well-Being From Meaning-Making and Timing of Turning Point

Predictor	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Grade 9 psychological well-being	.42***	.41***	.41***	.41***
Age		-.07	-.07	-.08
Gender		-.04	-.05	-.06
Parental education		.03	.02	.02
Canadian-born status		-.10	-.08	-.07
Meaning-making			.13*	.10
Timing of TP			-.09	-.13
Meaning-Making × Timing of Turning Point				.06
Model R^2	.177	.195	.223	.225
ΔR^2	.177***	.019	.028*	.002

Note. $N = 209$ participants who reported a turning point event. Higher scores on the psychological well-being composite indicate higher psychological well-being.

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

meaning-making was a positive concurrent predictor of higher well-being. Last, the interaction between meaning-making and timing of turning point did not significantly improve the model in Step 4.

Research Question 2: Is There a Significant Difference Between Adolescents Who Reported Meaning-Making and Those Who Did Not Report Meaning-Making on Psychological Well-Being Prior to the Experience of Their Turning Point, When Participants Were in Grade 9?

Given that we were able to assess participants' Grade 9 scores on well-being, only participants who reported having had experienced a turning point within the last 2 years (i.e., after Grade 9) were included in this analysis ($N = 134$). For this subset of participants, their Grade 9 assessment then would reflect scores on well-being prior to their turning point. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted with meaning-making as the independent variable and psychological well-being, measured in Grade 9, as the dependent variable. Results indicated that there was no significant difference between participants who reported meaning-making and those who reported no meaning-making on their Grade 9 well-being scores, $F = .997$, $p > .05$, partial $\eta^2 = .003$.

Research Question 3: Is the Reported Experience of a Turning Point Significantly Associated With Psychological Well-Being?

To examine whether the mere reported experience of a turning point would be associated with psychological well-being, a matching process was conducted to create a comparable group of adolescents who did not report a turning point experience. Of the larger sample of 803 adolescents who completed the study, the turning point group ($N = 209$) comprised adolescents who reported that they had experienced a turning point event. Each of these adolescents was then matched with an adolescent who did not report a turning point event on the basis of age, gender, parental education, and Canadian-born status. In other words, a no

turning point group was formed that comprised 209 matched participants from the larger sample who did not report experiencing a turning point event but who shared the same demographic profile as the adolescents who reported a turning point event.

A hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed where participants' Grade 9 scores on well-being was entered in Step 1, and the covariates (i.e., age, gender, parental education, and Canadian-born status) were entered in Step 2. Turning point group (reported turning point vs. no reported turning point) was entered as a predictor variable in Step 3. As expected, the results for Steps 1 and 2 did not differ from the results reported for Research Question 2. Most important, however, in Step 3, turning point group did not add any significant predictive value for psychological well-being.

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether meaning-making, in the context of turning points, would be significantly associated with psychological well-being among a sample of Grade 12 high school adolescents. Results indicated that adolescents who reported meaning-making within their turning point narrative concurrently reported higher well-being scores in Grade 12, controlling for Grade 9 scores, relative to their peers who reported no meaning-making within their turning point narrative.

Several reasons may explain this finding. First, through meaning-making, individuals may have the opportunity to understand their turning point experiences and subsequently successfully assimilate these experiences into their sense of self. Second, counterfactual thinking—defined as the ability to generate alternative hypothetical situations relating to one's present experience—is one proposed mechanism through which well-being may be achieved (Kray et al., 2010). Kray et al. (2010) found that when assessing life experiences, engaging in counterfactual thinking led college students to report significantly more meaning about their life experiences. Additionally, redemption, defined as the ability to infer positive affect subsequent to a negative life event, may be another mechanism through which meaning-making may yield higher psychological well-being (Pillemer, 2001). Although we

did not specifically code for redemption, we did find some evidence for this concept in the present study. One participant, for example, reported that “when my mum was sick, I learned to appreciate things more,” and another stated, “my close friend passed away a year ago and it has opened my eyes and I have matured; I am very thankful for what I have.”

In spite of some research studies linking meaning-making and psychological well-being, one of the most fundamental questions in the literature remains whether concurrent reports of meaning-making and well-being are a function of preexisting differences on well-being. In other words, if meaning-making is significantly associated with higher psychological well-being, were these individuals already better adjusted psychologically prior to the experience of their life event? According to the results in this study, adolescents who reported meaning-making did not differ significantly on well-being *prior* to the experience of their turning points, when they were in Grade 9. This important finding suggests that the significant positive association between meaning-making and psychological well-being was not necessarily a function of preexisting differences on this variable, prior to adolescents' turning point experiences but instead may be related to the meaning-making process.

Consistent with past research (Thorne & McLean, 2002; Thorne et al., 2004), turning points characterized as relationship and mortality events were most prevalent among our sample of high school adolescents. Conflicts and interpersonal encounters with significant others seem to hold grave meaning for adolescents and have the potential to reshape and redirect the life course. Moreover, mortality events, including the loss of a loved one, may have implications for one's identity or life story (Bagnoli, 2003; Pals, 2006), forcing the individual to reflect on personal beliefs and values (Catlin, 1993; Park & Folkman, 1997). As very few adolescents reported travel and moving events, it remains to be determined how these particular types of events may relate to meaning-making. An interesting point of note, however, was the fact that in the present study, travel experiences were generally based on trips that seemed to have an experiential learning component. For example, one participant in the current study reported, “I recently went to Guatemala on a mission trip. When I was there I realized the importance of life and God and realized that material things we have back at home are meaningless.” In contrast, Thorne et al.'s (2004) travel event category comprised leisure events. Future research should attempt to distinguish between travel events that comprise an educational or learning component and travel events that are purely for leisure as these two experiences may be qualitatively different and have very different implications for meaning-making.

An interesting finding of the present study was the fact that the timing of the turning point was not significantly associated with well-being. It is quite possible that the importance of time since turning point for adjustment might be a function of the specific type of turning point experienced. Some turning points such as mortality and moving events, for example, might require more time relative to other turning points, such as travel experiences. Given that some types of turning points were mentioned by few students (e.g., travel events), we were not able to determine the interaction effect between the timing of the turning point and type of turning point event on psychological well-being. Future research, however, should address this issue.

We also examined whether the mere reported experience of a turning point would be associated with psychological well-being. Results indicated that adolescents who reported a turning point did not differ from adolescents who did not report a turning point event on psychological well-being. Based on the trauma literature, we might expect that adolescents who reported a turning point event might be less psychologically adjusted than adolescents who did not report a turning point event. Bernsten and colleagues have reported a number of studies in which individuals who identify a traumatic or stressful event as being central to their identity (i.e., perception of the event as a turning point) also report more post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms in comparison to individuals who do not perceive their experience as a turning point (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006). Findings from the meaning-making literature, however, suggest that even for those individuals who have experienced a significant life-changing event, there is great variability in how individuals make sense out of their experiences and that this meaning-making process may have a positive impact on psychological well-being (McAdams et al., 2001). For example, whereas the experience of a turning point, such as bereavement, may be construed as traumatic for one individual, another individual may be able to deduce some positive meaning from the same event (McLean & Breen, 2009; McLean & Pratt, 2006; Tebes et al., 2004).

As participants in the current study were not specifically instructed to report a negative or positive turning point, there was much variability in the valence of the types of events that individuals reported—from falling in love to bereavement. A further examination of the events revealed that most of the turning points reported would not be considered traumatic. This may have accounted for the lack of a significant effect of turning point experience on psychological well-being. Based on McAdams et al.'s (2001) concept of redemption, it is crucial that future studies incorporate an assessment of the valence of both the turning point experience as well as the meaning that individuals report. For example, perhaps if adolescents were grouped based on the severity and number of stressful or negative turning points over their life span, we may have found different results. An interesting research question, which has not yet been addressed within the literature, is whether the number of significant life-changing events experienced might be significantly associated with meaning-making ability. As Michael and Snyder (2005) stated that the severity of a life event (such as the loss of a loved one) may propel one to engage in meaning-making, it might be worthwhile to explore whether the number of turning points experienced may have the same impact. Among those who have experienced a turning point, however, it is clear that the ways in which adolescents assimilate these experiences may have important implications, particularly for psychological well-being.

Limitations and Strengths

The present study has several limitations. First, participants were limited in the amount of space they were given to articulate their turning point events. Participants were given four lines in which to respond to the turning point question. Interviews may be one way to follow-up with participants. Particularly as some participants provided responses that were vague or unclear, the interview method would allow for the possibility of asking additional

questions that could potentially clarify some of those responses. At the same time, assessing turning points through a survey format allowed us access to a larger population of adolescents than would have been possible if we had specifically recruited for interviews. Importantly, “meaning-making” in the context of the present study may be a reflection of willingness to report meaning-making, rather than the ability to create meaning-making. In other words, perhaps if participants were specifically asked to report on meaning-making or were asked to describe their turning points within the context of a face-to-face interview, those who did not report meaning-making would have reported meaning-making.

A second limitation of the present study relates to the lack of a culturally diverse sample. This study was based on a homogenous sample of predominantly white, Canadian-born high school adolescents, and thus, results cannot be generalized to an ethnically diverse population of adolescents. Cultural differences across ethnicity, social class, and communality may influence both the types of experiences that are deemed turning points and the ways in which meaning-making is construed from these events. In one study, for example, Catlin (1993) found significant cultural differences between a sample of university students in the United States and Spain based on the extent to which grief affected self-esteem as well as trust and liking of others. Future research is needed to address the role of culture in meaning-making.

A third limitation relates to the interpretation of these results—that meaning-making was significantly associated with higher well-being in Grade 12 does not speak to causality. We are not able to rule out the possibility that a third variable, such as temperament, may better explain the association between meaning-making and psychological well-being. In addition, long-term longitudinal research is needed to examine whether the significant associations found in the present study in Grade 12 between meaning-making and well-being, remain over time. Future research should specifically examine the role of time since turning point within and across various types of turning point experiences.

A fourth limitation is that we were not able to assess the number and intensity/severity of life events that adolescents experienced. It is important to examine how these contextual factors relate to meaning-making and subsequent adjustment across the high school years. Future research should also distinguish among turning point events that vary in terms of the duration of the event itself. For example, a turning point such as parental divorce may span a longer period of time compared with a travel event (such as a mission trip) that may last only for a few days. A final limitation of the present study stems from the reliance on adolescent self-reports. Although our results may have been strengthened by the inclusion of other reporters such as parents and teachers, it is not clear whether anyone other than the adolescent can appraise an event as a turning point.

Important strengths of this study were the ability to account for possible preexisting differences on well-being prior to adolescents' experience of their turning points, as well as the role of timing of the turning point in relation to meaning-making and psychological well-being. Overall, the results of this study add to a growing body of literature on the meaning-making process and its associations with psychological well-being and adjustment, particularly among adolescents. Some researchers have suggested that benefits of meaning-making may place individuals at a higher level of psychological functioning than they were prior to the experience of a

traumatic event—a concept referred to as post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2008). The search for meaning is not a simple process and the assessment of such a complex construct remains a challenging task for researchers. Park (2010) emphasized a need for researchers to investigate the underlying cognitive processes that characterize meaning-making in addition to the products of the meaning-making process (such as lessons and insights).

Moreover, one area in need of further research is the extent to which subcategories within the broader turning point event categories relate to meaning-making. Researchers continue to categorize a wide range of life experiences as “relationship” and “mortality/life-threatening” events. These categories, however, are quite broad in nature, as events such as “falling in love” and “parental divorce” may be grouped under the “relationship” category, whereas “death of a parent” and “diagnosis of an illness” may be grouped under the “mortality/life-threatening” category. It may be necessary for researchers to incorporate a more contextualized assessment of these seemingly broad categories. For example, although “mortality/life-threatening” events remain one of the most prevalent types of turning points reported and are regarded as one of the most likely events to prompt meaning-making (McLean & Pratt, 2006; Michael & Snyder, 2005), it remains to be determined what specific contextual factors relating to the bereavement experience make meaning-making more likely. In other words, future research should determine how relationship to the deceased (i.e., loss of a friend, parent or grandparent), suddenness of death, mode of death (e.g., suicide, illness, accident) and level of closeness might impact meaning-making. Similarly, it may be necessary for future research to assess the extent to which the valence of “relationship” events relates to meaning-making. In other words, are individuals just as likely to report meaning-making for positive relationship experiences, such as falling in love, compared with more negative experiences, such as interpersonal conflict and break-ups?

In conclusion, adolescents, counselors, parents, and other sources of support can benefit from the knowledge that navigating life's unpredictable paths is not necessarily solely associated with negative affect. Although much more research in this area is needed, these findings provide some support for the possibility that when adolescents engage in a more intimate exploration of their life experiences—particularly those that cause significant change—positive consequences can emerge at the personal and relational level.

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Call for Papers for a Special Section of the *Journal of Family Psychology*: Spirituality and Religion in Family Life

Editors: Anmarie Cano and Annette Mahoney

This special section of the *Journal of Family Psychology* aims to stimulate the breadth and depth of rigorous scientific studies on the interface of faith and family life. Recent reviews demonstrate that spirituality and religion remain relevant to contemporary families, but critical gaps in the research literature compromise a balanced or deep understanding how faith operates in a family context (see Mahoney, Swank & Tarakeshwar, 2001; Mahoney, 2010; Mahoney, in press). For example, repeated studies suggest that higher religious attendance and salience helps to form (e.g., marital unions) and maintain (e.g., lowers divorce risk) traditional family bonds. But scarce research exists on specific positive or negative roles that spirituality and religion may play in families, especially in nontraditional or distressed families. To help address these gaps, we invite papers that address any of the following ways in which specific spiritual cognitions and behaviors centered on family life may:

- help or harm relational and individual adjustment, including, but not limited to, the sanctification of an aspect of family life, prayer for a family member, positive religious/spiritual coping strategies to cope with family issues, spiritual struggles or negative religious/spiritual coping tied to family difficulties, and perceiving negative family events as a sacred loss and/or desecration.
- facilitate or undermine the formation and maintenance of diverse types of families (e.g., cohabiting unions with and without children, same-sex couples with and without children, blended, foster, adoptive, and multi-generational families).
- be part of the problem or solution in coping with family-related distress. This includes, but is not limited to, difficulties in the formation (e.g., unwanted singlehood or cohabitation, unintended pregnancy, infertility) and maintenance (e.g., coping with infidelity, partner or parent-child violence, chronic relational conflict, divorce, or a family member who has medical, mental health, or developmental problems) of family relationships.

Questions about the special section can be addressed to the section editors, Anmarie Cano, Ph.D. (acano@wayne.edu) or Annette Mahoney, Ph.D. (amahone@bgsu.edu) Submit manuscripts through the *Journal of Family Psychology* portal (<http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/fam>) no later than **May 3, 2013** and please note that the submission is for this special section.