INTRODUCTION
American service members who survived a trauma like a prisoner of war (POW) experience and rebounded afterwards present outcomes of resilience that merit further exploration. Difficulties in defining or measuring human resilience in the clinical setting have been acknowledged for some time, with a call for greater openness to lessons from other disciplines. Transcendence as an identity-enhancing experiential process of meaning-making may offer insights that complement medical and psychological care. If a person fails to make meaning of an extraordinarily negative event, he may experience anti-transcendence, or an anti-process that results in by-products that are antonymous to transcendence, like destabilization of one’s sense of self or the fracturing or disintegration of connections within and beyond the self. Such outcomes may trigger a crisis of identity. Materials and Methods: Eight memoirs of resilient American POW survivors from two time periods and the text were digitized and converted using optical character recognition software (Foxit PhantomPDF) to enable scanning for repetitious word patterns and themed searches. As passages were selected, sorted, and tagged, I designed a database in Microsoft Access to enter and query the fragments. Everyday baselines were established for each memoirist, and instances of transcendence and anti-transcendence were analyzed. Results: While evidence was found across all memoirists for transcendence of personally relevant, extraordinarily positive and negative events, instances of failure to transcend extraordinarily negative events is not surprising. Types of personally relevant, extraordinarily negative events discussed included multiple instances of forced desecration of local graves to make way for construction projects by captors and breaking points after torture. Conclusion: Transcendence as an experiential meaning-making process may utilize existential resources that enable one to make sense of personally relevant, extraordinarily positive, and negative events. If identity-relevant experiences are more powerful predictors of distress and well-being than those not relevant to one’s sense of identity, then there should be greater focus on those kinds of experiences when working with service members struggling to bounce back from trauma. There are many contexts in which this can be done. Military chaplains, for example, are potentially very well suited to help service members reconnect with existential resources to help them make meaning of a traumatic event. Military psychologists can make space in their conversations discuss identity-relevant experiences. Examining written narrative can also help narrow the focus on identity-relevant experiences, both positive and negative. Written narrative about traumatic experiences as a form of self-narration carries with it an interpretive aspect that may help the person make meaning of it in way that he or she could not in a clinical setting. Although assessment of the potential therapeutic effect of written narrative was beyond the scope of the study, this might be one area to investigate.

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The Downside Risk of Failing to Transcend Extraordinarily Negative Experiences: A Narrative Analysis
Cabrini Pak, PhD

ABSTRACT
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INTRODUCTION
American service members who survived a trauma like a prisoner of war (POW) experience and rebounded afterwards present outcomes of resilience that merit further exploration. Difficulties in defining or measuring human resilience in the clinical setting have been acknowledged for some time, with a call for greater openness to lessons from other disciplines. Persistent challenges in identifying risk or protective factors influencing resilience also remain a topic of extensive discussion. Scales and inventories like the DRRI-2 have been used to detect “deployment-related risk and resilience factors with demonstrated implications for veterans’ post-deployment health.” Yet “comprehensive soldier fitness,” which incorporates insights from DRRI and utilizes “resilience training,” has been criticized as flawed and not supported by the research. Previous experience of hardship, like “life events that cause change, adversity, and challenges” or “prior deployments where SMs witnessed death and destruction” have been identified as possible antecedents to resilience, but practical implications of these findings remain vague and difficult to operationalize.

In an adapted illustration of resilience, Charles Carver differentiated between resilience and thriving by defining “resilience” as the “homeostatic return to a prior condition” and “thriving” as a “better-off-afterward experience” beyond that homeostatic return. Thriving may manifest in three ways: (1) desensitization to the stressor; (2) enhanced recovery arc (change in speed of recovery); and (3) continued functioning at a higher level than before the adverse event. An ability to thrive after an adverse event has implications in health and wellness, including reducing relapses, lowering vulnerability to new adversities, and improving health care system cost savings. However, reducing
“thriving training” to psychological interventions or cognitive emotional behavior therapy, often misses the deeper, existential resources that human beings draw from when attempting to overcome traumatic events. Those existential resources may reside upstream from these programs, like one’s sense of self, which may impact expressions of resilience or thriving, but are not always captured in a psychological assessment.

Positive and negative “identity-relevant experiences” may be more “powerful predictors of psychological distress or well-being” than those not relevant to one’s identity. One’s sense of self or identity can interact with trauma in adaptive or maladaptive ways, depending on the nature of the traumatic event and the stability of one’s sense of self. Studies have confirmed the potential maladaptiveness of constructing a sense of self that makes traumatic experience a central focus. A balanced focus on both the positive, identity-enhancing experiences, and the negative identity-threatening ones might offer insights into a more holistic understanding of resilience and thriving in the context of sense of self.

Transcendence as Experiential Meaning-Making Process

Transcendence as an identity-enhancing experiential meaning-making process may offer insights that complement clinical care. Transcendence has been described as a process of personal movement through time in ways that increase one’s awareness of the universe, reality, and truth. A dictionary definition of the verb “transcend” offers a potential baseline definition from which transcendence can be examined in multiple domains: “a) to rise above or go beyond the limits of; b) to triumph over the negative or restrictive aspects of: to overcome.” The idea that humans have a predisposition towards transcendence has been recognized in several fields, including neuropsychology, religious studies, and sociology. Transcendence and its relation to one’s sense of self have been explored in nursing, social psychology, philosophy, and religious studies, sometimes referencing numinous experiences resulting in a sudden awareness of the presence of something wholly other, and other times delving into how it influences self-references. Transcendence and its influence on one’s connection with others have also been explored, more traditionally in religious studies.

I used the dictionary definition of the verb “to transcend” as a neutral platform to develop a conceptualization of transcendence and anti-transcendence in my dissertation, drawing from sources in philosophy, religious studies, sociology, medicine, and neuroscience. Figure 1 illustrates my model of transcendence and anti-transcendence. Transcendence as experiential meaning-making process may have at least two possible outcomes: first, “stabilization of one’s sense of self, which enables the person to more firmly root him or herself in a response to the question, ‘What am I?’ The second outcome, extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, in space-time, gives the person coordinates in moral space that allows the person to draw from those coordinates in future situations.” Anti-transcendence, or the failure to transcend an extraordinarily negative, personally relevant experience, is the conceptual contrary to transcendence. The (solid) green arrows in Figure 1 represent the possible paths of personally relevant, extraordinarily positive events, while the (dotted) red arrows represent the possible paths of personally relevant, extraordinarily negative events.

Transcendence as defined above can be triggered by certain types of events: personally relevant, extraordinarily positive or negative events that suspend one’s “everyday heuristic.” An everyday heuristic is a term that describes how people might normally process events that are considered ordinary. The notion of an everyday heuristic is in line with the theory of cognitive miserliness, which posts that human beings are generally not willing to expend cognitive resources and will find ways to avoid effortful thinking. This may include the development of heuristics to process the everyday or ordinary. A more detailed conceptualization of an “everyday heuristic” is beyond the scope of this study.

Personally relevant, extraordinary events will carry with them either transcendent (positive) or anti-transcendent (negative) markers. Transcendent markers are those which would enhance meaning-making. The transcendentals (good, true, and beautiful) are well known in philosophy and literature and could serve as broad transcendent markers. They have served as anchors for meaning in poetry, prose, and in discussions of virtue and happiness.

Extraordinarily negative personally relevant events carry with them “anti-transcendent markers,” or those which would normally inhibit meaning-making from occurring. As indicated above, they would be the contraries of the transcendent markers (bad, false, and ugly), e.g., the “bad” experience of torture during questioning by captors. Such an event is personally relevant, extraordinarily negative, and likely to suspend one’s everyday heuristic, which will trigger an attempt to make meaning of this event. If meaning-making (which I designate as a “black box”) activity beyond the scope of the study) succeeds, then the person transcends that event, resulting in one or both possible outcomes: (1) stabilization of one’s sense of self and (2) extraordinary connections within or beyond the self, giving the person moral coordinates within space-time. If the person fails to make meaning of the extraordinarily negative event, he may experience anti-transcendence, or an anti-process that results in by-products that are antagonistic to transcendence, like destabilization of one’s sense of self or the fracturing or disintegration of connections within and beyond the self, potentially causing disorientation in moral space. In contrast, failing to make meaning of personally relevant, extraordinarily positive events does not, according to my model, result in any negative effects. The memory of the event eventually returns to the same repository as that which retains ordinary everyday experiences, until the person attempts to reestablish meaning for the experience.
Purpose
Using a qualitative, exploratory methodology that I developed to analyze written narrative, transcendence and anti-transcendence were tracked in the memoirs of eight resilient American service members who survived a POW experience and wrote about it later. Although the primary focus of the study was to conceptualize and track transcendence in written memoirs, the decision to focus on resilient American service members was made to explore how those who successfully bounced back from the trauma of a POW experience transcended it. “Resilience” in this study was assessed holistically (not psychologically) by examining the relative well-being and activities of the individual after release and the life of the person through publicly available materials. More on the sample selection is discussed in the Methods section.

I proposed that resilient American service members who survived and bounced back from something like a POW experience, and wrote about it later, left traces of transcendence in their stories, which can be studied. Evidence found that they successfully transcended extraordinarily negative and positive experiences associated with their POW experience. There was also some evidence to suggest that there is a downside risk of failing to transcend extraordinarily negative experiences. This article expands on the latter notion.

METHODS
Sample
Memoirs of American POW survivors from two time periods (World War II and Vietnam War) were selected based on a variety of factors: public availability of written memoirs that focused on the POW experience itself; representation across branches of the military (Air Force, Army, Navy); and known resilience of the service members who authored the memoirs. Resilience was assessed holistically, using publicly available data to ascertain that the individual led a functional and/or active life after release; had no known attempts at suicide after release; did not die of suicide. Table S1 provides more details on the service members whose POW memoirs were analyzed. All but one lived past the age of 80, all married, had families, and were active professionally. One was assassinated while still serving in the military. Two of the memoirists remain alive today.

Materials and Data Analytic Approach
Memoirs were purchased from booksellers and the text was digitized and converted using optical character recognition software (Foxit PhantomPDF) to enable scanning for repetitive word patterns and themed searches. Five of the memoirists were World War II veterans and three were Vietnam War veterans. Their experiences were clustered around three kinds of POW camps: German- and Japanese-run camps during World War II, and Vietnamese-run camps during the Vietnam War.

Not all the text in the memoirs were analyzed. Rather, the texts were mined to: (1) establish a “baseline” for everyday events, for each memoirist; (2) capture descriptions of personally relevant, extraordinarily positive or negative events that suspended their everyday heuristic, i.e., deviated significantly from their baseline; (3) capture explicit attempts to establish meaning of these events; and (4) tag outcomes mentioned or implied in the text. Only the text of these memoirs was analyzed; there was no in-person interaction with the memoirists themselves.
As passages were selected, sorted, and tagged, I designed a database in Microsoft Access to enter the fragments and query them. Table S2 provides the narrative table with the fields and values that were used. Since this was a qualitative, exploratory study for a dissertation, coding was executed using basic exegesis that paid close attention to rhetorical structure, sequence, narrative arc, and use of widely recognized references to mark transcendent and anti-transcendent events. Exegesis is a form of narrative analysis commonly used in theology and religious studies to examine pieces of sacred texts, which are often structured to tell humanly relevant, extraordinarily positive or negative experiences and make meaning of them for the reader. All authors wrote of their POW experiences using similar devices to different degrees, like inclusions, progressions, and intercalations, which are rhetorical devices designed to make the reader pay attention to certain parts of the text. Narrative research is not limited by rigid procedural steps, but tries to understand the narrator by examining his or her story and the layers of meaning-making embedded in it. Whether memoirists were using these devices consciously or unconsciously is beyond the scope of this study. Ruthellen Josselson notes that the process of identifying themes in narrative involves a hermeneutic of multiple readings of the text and “conversation with the larger theoretical literature…to remain sensitive to nuances of meanings express and different contexts into which meanings may enter.” My analytic approach followed the same general process, using exegetical tools and concepts found in my field (religion and culture).

The memoirists identified the “everyday” in overlapping yet distinctive ways. They therefore required an “everyday” baseline to be established for each person, rather than a more generic baseline for use across memoirs. For example, two American World War II airmen noted experiences of poor sanitary conditions, parasites, and lack of heat and medical care in the German-run camps. One of the memoirists recalled after the initial shock of finding maggots in their soup that within a week “we all ate the soup, maggots or no maggots. We got used to this kind of soup, and no one complained again.” The other, also captured in Germany, noted that boredom was part of his everyday experience, which was not mentioned as part of the experience of the first prisoner. The former was enlisted, while the latter was an officer.

By establishing baselines of the “everyday” for each memoirist, it was then possible to identify events that memoirists marked as both personally relevant and extraordinary, taking cues from his distinctive use of language. Personally relevant, extraordinary events that suspended one’s everyday heuristic fell into three categories: those that primarily carried transcendent markers; those that carried primarily anti-transcendent markers; and those that carried both transcendent and anti-transcendent markers. Examples of transcendent events included: experiences of natural beauty, like moonlight or the cherry trees in a field; being rescued by a fellow POW; regaining of freedom; reunion with other Americans after release; experience of God; and reunion with family members after release.

Examples of anti-transcendent events included: breaking points during torture; being forced to desecrate the graves of villagers to make way for building projects by captors; experience of predation by fellow POWs; intense, physically painful indoctrination sessions by communist captors; and listening to a fellow POW die in the adjacent cage.

Examples of experiences that carried both transcendent and anti-transcendent markers included: praying the Our Father together to the end, even as senior officers were removed for torture as they attempted to finish the prayer aloud; seeing the release of fellow POWs while being left behind; the retention or production of sacred symbols (like a wedding ring, or an American flag made from scraps in camp) under threat of dismemberment or beatings; and connecting with a Japanese family who offered former POWs hospitality after their release from a Japanese-run POW camp.

RESULTS

The POW memoirists in this study often noted transcendent and their contraries when extraordinary, personally relevant events appeared to suspend their everyday heuristic, subsequently triggering an attempt to make meaning of them. As a result, tagging recollections of transcendent and anti-transcendent events was possible. The results of the study were two-fold. First, evidence was found in all eight narratives for transcendence as an experiential meaning-making process and for the outcomes proposed. Second, although the instances were few in comparison with successful instances of transcendence, anti-transcendence, or the failure to transcend personally relevant, extraordinarily negative events, appeared to increase the risk of either destabilization of one’s sense of self or of disintegrating or severing extraordinary connections within or beyond the self. This section will summarize the findings for the first result and offer a few selections from my dissertation that illustrates the second result. While evidence was found across all memoirists for transcendence of extraordinarily positive and negative events, instance of failure to transcend extraordinarily negative events were only found in three of the narratives. Given that the sample consisted of resilient service members who appeared to rebound and even thrive after their experience, this scarcity of failure to transcend personally relevant, extraordinarily negative, events is not surprising.

Transcendence

Evidence of transcendence was found: service members were able to make meaning of transcendent and anti-transcendent events, resulting in either stabilization of one’s sense of self or establishing extraordinary ties within and beyond the self. For example, one World War II memoirist was able to make meaning of the anti-transcendent experience of explicit racism...
when he returned to the USA after his release from a German POW camp by reasserting his sense of self as both an African American and a Tuskegee Airman. A Vietnam War memoirist composed poetry after reflecting on two personally relevant, extraordinary events, one with anti-transcendent markers, and another with both transcendent and anti-transcendent markers. The first event was an intense and painful period of indoctrination by his communist captors. The second event was the release of his fellow prisoners, although he was left behind. In both cases, he was able to make meaning of these events in his poetry about them by referencing extraordinary connections within and beyond himself as his anchors, including, but not limited to, his connection with God. He referred to the last stanza of one of his poems when he reunited with his family after his rescue: “I had reached out and touched the light.”

**Loss of Moral Coordinates: Failing to Transcend the Anti-transcendent**

Failure to make meaning of anti-transcendent events appeared to result in the loss of extraordinary connections within and beyond the self for one World War II POW memoirist enslaved by the Japanese during his internment. Two sets of passages illustrated this. Both passages recalled the forced desecration and destruction of graves. In the first passage, prisoners were forced to build a canal in the countryside, and occasionally they came across family graves. He described a variety of graves, from simple mounds to more elaborate structures. The bodies ranged in decomposition, some being just bones, but others still in the process of decomposing, making the removal “messy.” At first, they were reluctant to disturb the gravesites, but the memoirist later tells the reader that “we had no choice.” The order to destroy the graves suspended his everyday heuristic, as indicated by his initial reluctance, but their inability to refuse their captors forced him to do what went against his values. The subsequent failure to transcend the experience appeared to result in the severing of extraordinary ties within and beyond himself, causing a loss of moral coordinates: “we became hardened and attacked each grave site with very little compassion.”

The second passage recalls the order to destroy more graves to make way for a building project to replicate Mt. Fuji as a memorial to Japanese soldiers. By this time, the prisoners worked 6 days a week, regardless of the weather, and their bodies became “nothing but corded muscles and skin.” Being both hungry and hardened by the labor, his description of the destruction of the small farms and their family graves noted their lack of reverence for the dead or sympathy for the families whose property and burial sites they were destroying. He concludes with yet another reference to the loss of something: “Our finer emotions were slowly being ground away.” In both “graves” accounts, the memoirist documents the severing of extraordinary connections within and beyond himself: becoming hardened; loss of reverence for the dead; loss of sympathy or compassion for the families of the dead whose graves they destroyed; and loss of one’s finer emotions.

**Breaking Points After Torture: Before and After Transcendence**

Two Vietnam War POW memoirists described their breaking point during torture and the times before and after they were able to transcend that extraordinarily negative experience. I had mentioned before two possible outcomes of transcendence: (1) stabilization of one’s sense of self; and (2) establishing extraordinary connections within and beyond the self, in space-time, giving the person coordinates in moral space that allows him to draw from them in future situations. Anti-transcendence, or the failure to make meaning of these extraordinarily negative experiences, would result in one or both of the following: (1) destabilization of one’s sense of self or (2) disintegration or severing of extraordinary connections within and beyond the self. Both memoirists were prisoners for over 5 years. Both were also in their 30s at the time of their capture, but one wrote his memoir within months of his release (Memoirist “A”), while the other wrote his almost forty years later (Memoirist “B”). I will begin with the memoirist who wrote his account within months of his release.

Memoirist A described a 4-to-5-day ordeal, with beatings every 2–3 hours, as his torturers rebroke his arm and cracked his ribs, before he reached “the lowest point of my 5½ years in North Vietnam.” This marked a personally relevant, extraordinarily negative event. It was laced with anti-transcendent markers. For example, he noted that “I was at the point of suicide,” and “Every man has his breaking point. I had reached mine.” Two anti-transcendent outcomes appeared to manifest in his narrative, before he transcended this event: (1) he recalled being “reduced to an animal,” reflecting a destabilization of his sense of self; and (2) he was at the point of suicide, willing to sever extraordinary ties that he had within and beyond himself. In Memoirist A’s case, a period of rest following his breaking point enabled him to transcend it. After that rest, he identifies a reconnection within himself: “This time I was able to resist. I was able to carry on. They couldn’t “bust” me again.”

Memoirist B, who was imprisoned at the same camp as Memoirist A, also describes his breaking point as “the lowest point in all my six years of captivity.” In the moments after this personally relevant, extraordinarily negative event, he describes a moment of anti-transcendence, with what appear to be corresponding anti-transcendent outcomes: destabilization of his sense of self and severing extraordinary connections within and beyond himself, causing a loss of orientation in moral space: “I had friends who were already in the POW system. I knew they must have emerged from the same horrific torture that had broken me with their honor intact. But I had failed...If I ever saw my fellow POWs, I wouldn’t be able to hold my head up.”
Memoirist B was pulled from solitary confinement after 18 days, along with a Navy pilot, and then pushed into a cell with another American prisoner. Unlike Memoirist A, the period of rest did not enable Memoirist B to transcend his breaking point. Memoirist B was only able to transcend it after reconnecting with fellow prisoners and listening to one of them explain the meaning of breaking under torture: “everyone who goes through that type of interrogation has one of two things happen: either they broke or died—some did both.” Memoirist B recalls “absolute euphoria at hearing these words,” now able to reject his self-label as a “failure,” and take on a more acceptable one: “average.” He was also able to reestablish extraordinary ties with his fellow POWs after confessing his breaking point and being reassured by them.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

Transcendence as an experiential meaning-making process may utilize existential resources that enable one to make sense of transcendent and anti-transcendent events. Failure to transcend anti-transcendent events may carry two identity-related downside risks: (1) destabilization of one’s sense of self; and (b) severing connections within and beyond the self, causing a disorientation in moral space, or what Charles Taylor would call an “identity crisis.”

Victor Frankl asserted that man’s search for meaning is “the primary motivation in his life and not a ‘secondary rationalization’ of instinctual drives.” He also said that the frustration of a human being’s will to make meaning of one’s life may carry consequences: existential frustration and noëgenic neuroses. He defined “existential” in three ways: “(1) existence itself, i.e., the specifically human mode of being; (2) the meaning of existence; and (3) the striving to find concrete meaning in personal existence, that is the will to meaning.” Noëgenic neuroses, he said, arise from existential problems, not from conflicts between drives and instincts.

If identity-relevant experiences are more powerful predictors of distress and well-being than those not relevant to one’s sense of identity, there should be a greater focus on those kinds of experiences when working with service members struggling to recover from trauma. There are many contexts in which this can be done. Military chaplains are potentially very well suited to help service members reconnect with existential resources to help them make meaning of a traumatic event. Military psychologists can make space in their conversations to help service members examine identity-relevant experiences. High quality, positive, social support have been identified as something contributing to enhanced resilience to stress. Social ties with a community have been known to impact one’s personal sense of self, and this has been confirmed such fields as anthropology, sociology, religious studies, and social psychology.

Written narrative can be mined for identity-relevant experiences, both positive and negative. Written narrative about traumatic experiences as a form of self-narration carries with it an interpretive aspect that may help the person make meaning of it in way that he or she could not in a clinical setting. Although assessment of the potential therapeutic effect of written narrative was beyond the scope of the study, this might be one area to investigate. One of the memoirists studied in my dissertation did explicitly indicate that telling his story by writing it down did indeed contribute to his healing, in addition to his decision to get professional help.

Given that this was a qualitative, exploratory study in a field outside of medicine or military psychology, it had some substantial limitations. Although the volume of text sifted was huge (approximately 1,500 pages), the sample size was very small (eight total memoirs). My method of narrative analysis utilized conceptual tools from a different discipline, and the design, development, population, and use of a relational database to sort the narrative fragments were also novel. The approach needs to be retested.

I focused on American service members with demonstrated resilience to trauma, and as a result I found many more instances of success rather than failure to transcend personally relevant, extraordinarily negative experiences. Expanding the study of anti-transcendence in comparison with transcendence by analyzing narratives in which failures to make meaning of such experiences are more frequently mentioned would be a next step.

Suicide letters left by American service members who were unable to bounce back from their experiences in war and killed themselves should be studied. Although psychological autopsies of suicide most often found mental disorders having the strongest association with suicide, researchers have also identified the need to further study the interaction between such things as particular mental disorders, social adversity, social isolation, and previous communications of intent. These interactions may be partially tracked in written narrative. Post-mortem examination of the existing corpus of suicide notes could help shed some light on anti-transcendence and its risks, potentially informing preventive measures to aid service members currently struggling to recover from traumatic experiences.

My study was also limited to male service members, primarily Caucasian, with one African American. Female service members should also be studied, given that female veterans have a 250% higher risk than civilian women for suicide. Future studies should include females and minorities in the American service member population to look for gender or ethnic differences in narrative.

**SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIAL**

Supplementary material is available at Military Medicine online.
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