

## THE TRANSFORMATIONAL EXPERIENCE OF INSIGHT: A LIFE-CHANGING EVENT

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*The present study produces a model of insight, as generated by a grounded theory analysis of interviews with individuals who have reported experiencing life-altering insights. This model describes the initiation, unfolding, and manifestation of the insight as well as how change ensued in the lives of participants. Commonalities in transformative insight experiences emerged in this model. The core category was "Integrating novelty: Meeting challenges to interdependence." Novel experiences challenged participants' sense of independence, prompting strong emotion, increased self-awareness, and the resolution to make changes in their lives and relationships.*

The experience of insight has long been a topic of intrigue for psychotherapists, researchers, and philosophers alike. Despite the extensive theoretical literature describing the relationship of insight and personal change, psychology still lacks consensus on a definition of insight. The concept can refer to a sudden or intuitive shift in awareness that allows individuals to solve a problem or experience a phenomenon differently (e.g., Greeno, 1978; Metcalfe & Wiebe, 1987; Sternberg & Lubart, 1996), but also may indicate a general level of self-awareness—as when referring to schizophrenic patients' insight and drug compliance (e.g., McCabe, Quayle, Beirne & Duane, 2000). At various times, psychologists define it as a psychoanalytic process, a spiritual epiphany, or a type of experiential knowing (e.g., Hutter, 2000; Miller & C'de Baca, 2001; Miller, 1992; Miller, 2000; Zack, 2001), but, as this word has fallen into common usage, it often is presented without any clarification at all (e.g., Pronin, Kruger, Savitsky & Ross, 2001).

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Although insight has been examined as the product of a variety of processes, such as meditation (e.g., Weisman & Smith, 2001), psychedelic drugs (Grinspoon & Doblin, 2001), and travel challenges (e.g., McGettigan, 1997), psychology's most extensive contribution to the understanding of this phenomenon has been its research on psychotherapeutic insight. Although space prohibits an extensive review of the wide variety of theories of insight, this article will present a brief review of some of the dominant models of insight that have been influential within this context.

## Insight Within a Psychotherapeutic Context

There is consensus within the psychotherapy literature that a realization has the potential to prompt therapeutic change (e.g., Jinks, 1999), however, there is little agreement about how this change might be realized or what additional factors might be necessary. For some theorists, insight is synonymous with change (e.g., Miller, 2000; Miller & C'de Baca, 2001), while, for others, insight alone is insufficient in producing change (e.g., Gaylin, 2000), and, for a third group, it is an awareness that can only *follow* change (e.g., Levenson, 1998).

Within the framework of psychoanalytic theory, the reconstrual of the therapeutic relationship is seen as leading to insight. Once the clients realize how old objects have constrained their view of the therapist, they can generate a new therapist-object and achieve insight across their relationships (e.g., Glucksman, 1993; Pulver, 1992). Therapists are urged by these analysts to appreciate how intertwined these processes need to be for successful therapy to occur. In contrast to these theorists, however, Zack's (2001) study of psychodynamic clients' reports concluded that insight was insufficient for the production of change. Also, he found that clients and therapists did not converge in their identification of insight experiences. Although the interrater identification of global insight moments appeared to be more reliable, ratings of his four postulated elements, awareness, understanding, valence, and arousal, were inconsistent. The study underscores how clients may realize insights within a variety of forms that may not be evident to therapists or researchers.

And, indeed, while psychodynamic models associated insight with awareness into unconscious conflicts, other psychotherapy models have sought to promote an increased awareness in other modes of functioning. Perceptual-cognitive models prioritize the development of awareness about one's thinking and processing patterns (e.g., Greeno, 1978; London, 1998; Metcalfe & Wiebe, 1987). Some recent theorists have

framed this cognitive change within a social context that influences unconscious assumptions (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi & Sawyer, 1995). For instance, using Lewin's field theory, Rosner (2000) described insight as resulting from a shift in the demands of a situation, allowing for the reorganization of self-perceptions and a new expression of existing knowledge.

In contrast, humanistic therapies promote a greater awareness of experiential and emotional functioning. Within this perspective, self-awareness has been theoretically central as it leads towards actualization, however, it may be engendered through a variety of therapist interventions. For instance, while traditional client-centered therapists work to provide an environment in which the client can achieve heightened self-awareness (e.g., Rogers, 1961), the Process Experiential model of therapy (Greenberg, Rice & Elliott, 1993) uses a variety of targeted mechanisms to heighten self-awareness, such as the deliberate juxtaposition of conflicting experiences.

Stevens and Walker (2002) have conducted an in-depth review of the insight literature, considering it from a constructivist perspective. They creatively elaborated upon Kelly's (1955) Experiencing Cycle, which positioned insights as the result of imaginative exploration of possibility, followed by the anticipation and assessment of outcomes and then, finally, reconstrual. Within this model, Kelly defined insight as the result of the development of new constructs, rather than shifts along construct poles or the alteration of constructs or construct systems. They broaden this definition by drawing in other theorists' work (e.g., McCoy, 1977; Matte-Blanco, 1988) to describe how emotion functions to signal when anticipations are correct before they are consciously understood, so as to guide the formulation of new constructs. They posit that before reaching an insight, a person enters a loosened, non-critical state that aids in the generation of innovative, tentative ideas. Processes of associational thought and discrimination alternate until an emotionally validating incipient construct cues the continued discrimination or "tightening" of a new construct, which is then experienced with the certainty that often characterizes insight.

This limited review describes only a small number of the many theoretical understandings of insight. It has been understood as a process bound within reconstituted transferences, as a shift in cognitive perception, as a result of an accepting environment, a discerning awareness of emotion, and as the result of tightening a loosened construct system. Though its facilitation is a central task in many therapeutic approaches, even within this enterprise, insight remains enigmatic in its mechanism and effects.

## Study Objectives

In the insight literature there is little systematic study of how these experiences can generate life transformation. The aim of the current research was to develop a model of the process of life-altering insights, grounded in participants' accounts. The investigators sought understanding of the complexity of contemporary experience of insight and the identification of processes common across participants.

The current researchers include a psychologist and a group of graduate students from various disciplines (i.e., business, communication, audiology, sociology, and psychology) interested in the idiosyncratic experience of insight and felt change. Some of the group was interested in this topic in relation to their activities as psychotherapists who guide clients towards this goal, some in connection with humanistic beliefs about personal change, and others in connection with academic disciplines outside of psychology.

## METHOD

### Participants

The participants in this study were living in Memphis, Tennessee, at the time of the interview. Participants reported their age, occupation, gender, and ethnicity. Demographic information, as reported by the participants, is presented in Table 1. The final subject pool included variation in age, race, occupation, gender, and insight event. Within a grounded-theory study, such diversity is desirable as it allows for the development of a model that reflects a greater complexity of expe-

**TABLE 1** Participant demographics

Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation
54	F	White	Children's therapist
59	F	White	Office manager
57	M	White	Self-employed
28	M	White	Student
26	F	Jewish	Student
30s	F	African-American	Clerical
29	F	Hispanic	Doctoral student
29	M	White/Taiwanese	Student
40s	F	White	Fundraiser/student

riences. The insights studied are not tied to any one context and those relayed by the participants occurred in relation to events such as robbery, poverty, mothering difficulties, relationship difficulties, psychotherapy, and the adjustment to new cultures.

## **Procedure**

### *Recruitment*

The participants were selected using a method of maximal variation. Researchers deliberately tried to recruit a sample that included diversity among the participants in terms of demographics and insight events. Flyers were posted on campus and in the community requesting volunteers “who have had experiences of insight that have changed their lives,” and they expressed the researchers’ interest “in learning about the workings of insight in people’s lives.” Additionally, the snowballing method, or word-of-mouth, was used to recruit participants, and classmates were asked to help advertise the study. Participants were paid \$10 to recompense them for their time.

### *Interviewing*

Interviewers received six hours of training on qualitative interviewing technique and were trained to use open-ended questions and nonbiasing prompts to guide the interview and to seek clarification when needed. Interviews were conducted on campus, lasted an average of 45 minutes, and were tape-recorded. The main question of the interview was: “How do people experience insights that they feel have been life-changing?” Prompts were used, as necessary, to ask participants to describe the insight event (facilitating factors, place, time, surrounding events, thoughts, emotions), the new understanding therein, the link between the insight and life changes, and any change(s) that occurred post-insight.

### *Grounded Theory*

The analysis was conducted using a grounded theory approach. Within this inductive method, credibility is established largely through the rigor of induction (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is a theory-generating approach rather than a verificational one (Rennie & Brewer, 1987) and is named for its purpose of developing theory “grounded” in the reports under investigation. In the present study, this method of

analysis was selected to guide the development of a theory of insight based in experiential description.

Memos were kept throughout the process by all researchers. These memos served to help investigators be aware of their assumptions and set aside biases, to keep record of procedural decisions, and to record theoretical ideas for discussion within the research team. The computer program, QSR-Nudist 4, was used to analyze and organize the data.

Each researcher conducted one interview and then segmented that interview into "meaning units"—that is, units of text which each contained one main idea (see Giorgi, 1970). All meaning units were assigned a label summarizing this idea. Using the process of constant comparison, researchers compared all meaning units to develop categories based upon commonalities between units. After initial categories were composed, those categories were compared to one another and superordinate categories were created that represented commonalities between initial categories. Then the superordinate categories were compared to one another, and in such a fashion, a hierarchy was developed.

The initial categories tend to be more concrete, with labels that remain very close to the wording of the interviewees. As the researchers moved higher in the hierarchy, the concepts being compared become more abstract, leading to the development of theories at the highest levels. At the apex of the hierarchy is the core category, which represents the dominant theme present within the model.

At first, the researchers in the present study worked individually to categorize the meaning units from their own interviews and relate them to others' units. Afterwards, they worked in pairs to compare initial categories and, then, to review sections of the developing hierarchy. In order to maintain consensus within the group, the research team discussed the process of analysis on a weekly basis and, as the upper level categories were generated, discussed emerging theories. Within group discussions, expert status was conferred upon those researchers who conducted the interviews that contributed to the category in question. This process of analysis is coherent with a hermeneutic approach as it places value on the lived experience of the researchers who conducted an interview by giving them a provisional authority in the discussions of that text. The team was guided to consider the incorporation of multiple suggestions, however, if they were thought to enrich the hierarchy.

Within grounded theory method, "saturation" occurs when the addition of new data does not lead to the creation of new categories. At this point, the hierarchy is considered complete and data collection is halted. In the present study, saturation was reached after the seventh transcript was entered, as two further transcripts did not result in new categories.

## Credibility Checks

This study included three forms of credibility checks, which gave researchers the opportunity to assess the thoroughness and accuracy of their analysis. First, all participants were asked a set of questions at the conclusion of their interviews to increase the thoroughness of the interview data and to minimize any distortions due to the interviewing process. Specifically, participants were asked if anything *wasn't* asked that the interviewee felt was relevant. They were asked to comment upon their experience of the interview, the interviewers' style, and whether there were any restrictions on what they disclosed. These questions allowed the interviewer to inquire about any information that might have been withheld so as to include it in the analysis. In general, participants described the interviews as thorough, and reported that they did not feel inhibited by either the interview structure or the interviewers' style.

Second, the research team engaged in processes of consensus seeking, which lend credibility to the findings through the support of multiple investigators' converging opinions. In addition to the process of analyzing data in pairs, the team met together weekly for a period of four months to discuss the process of analysis and to seek consensus in the interpretation of categories and the generation of theory.

Finally, in order to provide a further check on the resulting hierarchy, feedback from the participants of the study was sought after the completion of the analysis, so that the investigators could evaluate whether the findings accurately represented their experiences. Participants were asked to review the results of the study and to provide feedback on the core category and dominant themes in the analysis. All nine participants responded to these questionnaires.

These questions indicated that participants felt that, overall, the research findings were highly accurate in reflecting (Mean = 5.7, where 1 = not at all, and 7 = very much), and not contradicting (Mean = 1.4, where 1 = not at all, and 7 very much) their experiences. Responses to questions on the main themes will be presented following their descriptions in the results section.

## RESULTS

There were 766 meaning units identified from the interview transcripts. As meaning units can be assigned to multiple categories when their meaning contributes to the understanding of more than one category, the final hierarchy contained 1037 meaning units. Although space will

only permit the top four category levels to be discussed in the present article, the hierarchy contained eight levels of categories.

The following lexicon will be used when referring to the categories at each level. The top-level category will be termed the “core category.” There were five “clusters” subsumed under this level, and 25 “categories” at the following level. In turn, the categories were comprised of 68 “subcategories.” In other words, the levels of the hierarchy are as follows: core-category, clusters, categories, and subcategories. The results section will be divided into sections at the cluster level, to present most efficiently the contents of the hierarchy, followed by a description of the core-category.

*Cluster 1. Painful or Uncertain Life Circumstances  
Pose a Challenge to One’s Sense of Independence,  
Resulting in the Need for External or Internal Change*

The participants frequently reported insights arriving within a context of distressing or anxiety-producing events. Seven of the participants described their context as *explicitly* related to the emerging insight, and all nine described insights as emerging within situations that were stressful or painful (see Table 2). These contexts included difficulty structuring positive mother-child relationships, long-term confining or dishonest intimate partner relationships, and being subject to serious crime, accidents, or poverty. These events tended to generate discomfort in the participants’ experience of interdependence with others as they challenged their expectations of others or the expectations that they had believed others had of them (see Table 3).

The first category, *Themes of independence or dependence are contemplated, leading to more adaptive interdependence*, indicated that the participants felt a change in self-reliance after the insight. For instance, one participant recognized, “that I really could take care of myself. Finally, knowing and realizing that I could take care of myself. I didn’t need someone else to do it for me” (Participant #8). Meanwhile, another interviewee described realizing that she needed to allow herself to rely on others. “I needed to depend on somebody, but I always wanted to be independent. So I guess it made me sad and cry that I had to actually have someone to help me do this and that” (Participant #2). Individuals described alternatively the desire for solitude and self-sufficiency or for increased companionship and interpersonal connection. Although some participants learned to be more autonomous, others’ insights helped them develop a greater comfort with their dependence on others.

Similarly, another category, *Insights often occur during a period of*

**TABLE 2** Descriptions of insights and their context

Participant no.	Context	Insight
01	Participant being in therapy as she would “constantly and forever scream” at her children without self-control.	Realizing that her mother loved her, despite her also being a “screamer” and teaching this parenting style.
02	A confining marriage that caused great insecurity and self doubt.	The decision to leave the relationship to realize greater independence and self-determination.
03	The participant’s child being in a permanently debilitating accident.	A deeper understanding that there are events she can’t control but can accept.
04	The experience of being denied food by a charity after poverty had left the participant without food for three days.	A decision to be self-reliant.
05	Growing up feeling ashamed of being poorer than others in the participant’s circle and trying to conform.	Realizing that it was OK to be “different” from others—giving the self permission to be unique without shame.
06	The experience of being seriously wounded in an armed robbery.	A recognition of her own vulnerability, as assumption of greater vigilance, leading to greater spirituality.
07	Having grown up in poverty with great financial concerns.	Realizing it’s better to abandon attempts to control one’s future, to be less fearful.
08	A distressing experience of visiting her homeland after living in America for years and feeling alien.	The new understanding of her homeland, as undeveloped, and a decision to leave her culture—a redefinition of self and goals.
09	An unhappy, dishonest intimate relationship.	Realizing that she could take care of herself and leaving.

*questioning life circumstances*, captured the responses of individuals who were victims of disturbing incidents and then realized that they had held assumptions that were incorrect. Their insight first occurred when confronted with an unexpected situation, such as having their trust in others broken. A subcategory such as, *Crime can happen anywhere*, is an

**TABLE 3** Painful or uncertain life circumstances challenge one's sense of independence resulting in the need for internal or external change

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Categories and subcategories
Insight often occurs during a period of questioning life circumstances <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Crime can happen anywhere</li> <li>• Insight presents a difficult path to salvation</li> <li>• In insight one questions one's actions</li> <li>• Realizing one is not content in the present situation</li> </ul>
Themes of independence are contemplated in relation to the insight <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independence becomes important</li> <li>• Insight followed by a need for unusual solitude</li> <li>• Insight followed by need to figure things out alone</li> <li>• Insight is preceded by a long enmeshed relationship</li> <li>• Insight is followed by realization of a need for more friends</li> </ul>
Insight can call for behavioral change or an internal shift in beliefs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insights often generate change, but can be without behavior change</li> <li>• Insight was followed by a realization and a need to change</li> <li>• Insight changed some beliefs and reinforced others</li> <li>• Insight must include both change and action</li> </ul>
Period of time simultaneous to or preceding insight can be difficult to the extent of being painful

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example of such a realization. Whereas the previous category in this cluster tended to describe long-term interpersonal stress or tension leading to an insight, this category described an insight suddenly emerging from the shock of traumatic events and then needing to be processed afterwards.

In both cases, however, interviewees appeared to go through a distressing experience that was significant enough to challenge their previous beliefs about interpersonal relationships. The category, *The period of time simultaneous or preceding the insight is painful or difficult to think about*, suggested that insights might be most likely to arise from situations that confront an individual due to their serious personal implications. Events described were not ones that these individuals could easily ignore or dismiss, and so they demanded attention and reconciliation with other ideals and values. Although anguish is immediately comprehended in descriptions of having a child rendered brain damaged, or becoming disabled oneself, it became evident in those stories of living for years in other constraints (e.g., relational or financial) that curtailed interviewee's sense of agency and self-determination.

Interviewees described their taxing situations as leading to a sense

that some change needed to occur, however, they defined the quality of change in disparate terms. Some interviewees stated that a clear behavioral change was mandated by the insight, while others described the ensuing change as an internally felt shift in beliefs. Although some individuals defined insights as necessarily having behavioral ramifications, internal changes also were described as life-altering and powerful.

I'm glad I had the insight. It was a great change. I changed my life because I needed to change it. Sometimes you just understand things about the world, or about yourself. And that's a good thing. It doesn't necessarily mean you have to act upon it. That's what I was working on when I was in therapy . . . to listen to yourself, talk to yourself, when you do that you come up with more insights, because the communication is better . . . when things happen to you, [you] don't repress them (Participant #9).

When asked to give feedback on this cluster, most of the participants endorsed the idea that their insight came from being confronted with an experience that challenged their previously held assumptions (Mean = 5.3; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Six of the nine respondents indicated that during the insight process they engaged in a process of comparing their lives before and after this change. When asked if the insight arose from one specific "triggering" event, five of the participants responded affirmatively, one was unsure and one responded in the negative. When asked about the development of their insights, however, only two of the participants reported that their insights were the result of a sudden new awareness. The seven other participants described a gradual process of evolution, with the insight arriving "slowly" for three but culminating "in a quick moment" for four interviewees.

### *Cluster 2. Braving the Emotions Generated by the Insight Leads to an Acceptance of the Insight*

Individuals described an emotional process that accompanied the process of developing insight (see Table 4). As described in the previous cluster, insights appeared to emerge from a context charged with emotion. All nine participants, prior to the insight experience, reported a sense of frustration or uncertainty with their lives and a sense of emotional conflict.

Participants needed to find the courage and the emotional resources to examine and accept their situation in order to move to a new awareness. This process was described in the category, *Working through turmoil and confusion leads to change in understanding self*. At first, many of them described feeling humiliation or shame from being in an unhappy or

**TABLE 4** Braving the emotions generated by the insight leads to an acceptance of the insight

Categories and subcategories
Working through turmoil and confusion leads to change in understanding self <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The strife in feeling less trusting of others</li> <li>• Frustration while trying to cope through a difficult event</li> <li>• Transitional time allows for emotional shift to occur</li> <li>• Initial feelings of shame or embarrassment about the change</li> </ul>
After insight: emotions of accomplishment and appreciation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Greater appreciation of life came from experience of insight</li> <li>• Relief and accomplishment felt after insight experience</li> <li>• The changes brought about more positive feelings</li> <li>• Changes from insight are seen as a positive outcome</li> </ul>
The experience of change after insight is not necessarily permanent and complete <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Still feel scared sometimes</li> <li>• Still learning how I want to integrate the insight in some ways</li> </ul>

needy situation. “I was always concerned about how I didn’t have any fancy clothes, so I was always concerned about how I dressed, and I was ashamed, really, I was ashamed of where I lived” (Participant #4). This shame and self-blame placed a lot of pressure on the individual and restricted the individual from developing internal or external supports or reassurances.

Often, participants described an accompanying period of frustration and effort while trying to cope and keep up “appearances.” Inwardly, they described the feeling that something had to change, but concurrently felt: an uncertainty about how this shift would be manifested and an associated fear or resistance. One interviewee described learning this way of coping from her mother, saying, “She was always pretty strong. She didn’t tell everybody her troubles. She just handled them. So that was the goal I was always striving for and so I tried not to do a whole bunch of that either. I tried not to talk negative about my [dishonest] husband” (Participant #5). As integrating the insight into their ways of understanding the world often would force participants to confront painful emotions, they described a variety of coping strategies that helped them repress or deny the experience until they were ready to engage in self-examination. These included being angry at the world, blaming themselves, becoming depressed about the situation, withdrawing from others, deciding to appear positive to others, and being “tough.”

Finally, interviewees described a transitional period in which they wrestled with the anxiety of questioning their prior beliefs and then mourned the loss of their old world view. This time was characterized by emotional highs and lows and behavioral choices that were at times inconsistent with the choices that were suggested by the insight. One participant describes this emotional cycle.

There were a lot of highs and lows as you can imagine. There were days when I was very depressed but maybe, once again, I tried not to sit and cry on every body's shoulder. But once I got over the crying spells, then I would realize I'm only hurting me, and then I would just mentally say you get through this, you can do it, and try to think positive and then I would try everything I could. . . . And then I would pray about it and then I would get positive again and then I would try some more and that's all I could do, but then there came a point at the end of that year that I knew I just had to move on. (Participant #5)

The process of insight often began with powerful emotions such as sadness, fear, frustration, and anger, but was followed by happiness, peace, and greater security after the insight was integrated into a new sense of identity and interpersonal relationship. Participants reported a sense of shock or anxiety when initially comparing two sets of experiences or beliefs. Working through the process of insight seemed like an emotional roller coaster, as participants described experiencing both sets of emotions together.

The struggle through this emotional turmoil, however, was reported to be worthwhile by participants. The process of identifying emotions helped to facilitate the recognition and integration of the insight experience. The desire to develop a deeper understanding of self or the world drove individuals to move through this difficult experience. The category, *After insight: A sense of accomplishment and appreciation*, revealed that the participants expressed a sense of pride for having gone through their struggle. They felt a stronger appreciation for life, and more positive emotions in general. They began to formulate methods of soothing their anxieties and increasing their sense of self-acceptance, such as prayer and consciously relinquishing control. For instance, one mother described how her anxiety about her children's decisions changed after an insight following a car accident that left her son mentally disabled.

I'm pretty much a controlling kind of person. . . . Like trusting the physician, I never really had to trust one before. . . . It was a new experience when I had to, actually had to hand it [my son's brain injury] over to them and say, "I've got to trust you." . . . I'd never even thought about that [the lack of trust] before . . . and now it was

something I had to do in my mind . . . to make all these adjustments. I learned that . . . you don't have to be in control. . . . It's much easier for me now to back off and to let other people take the role . . . it's easier for me just to allow them to branch out and be their own person. I don't have to control them. (Participant #8)

As she learned to comfort her anxiety, she integrated her insight so that new responses became available to her across contexts, increasing her resilience when facing future stressors. In general, participants described this process of attributing meaning to the emotional reactions that followed the anxiety or distress inherent in interdependence.

This experience of change did not, however, mean that the emotions of shame, fear, or anxiety never returned. The third category was *Emotional changes after the integration of insight are not necessarily permanent and complete*. For instance, one participant described the pain remaining after her decision to leave her country of origin,

The landscape was absolutely stunning, the lakes, the water. The family of mine is still there. The dancing, the liveliness of everybody. . . . I guess, not being able to give that to children, if I have any, is a very sad thought because they will never have that. There is no way I can give it to them, so there is a part of me that they will lose and they'll never have. . . . But pain is like, I'm crying because I can't have those things, [but] I'm pretty happy and very, very comfortable. The benefits to me outweigh the costs, and that's to me, personally. And there are members of my family who are here and they will always want to go back. . . . But that's them. That's their life and this is mine. (Participant #6)

Even when decisions had been firmly made, it was not uncommon that residual emotions remained. Often, these lingering feelings included fears of depending on others or of being too separate or alone.

When giving their reactions to this cluster, most respondents endorsed the idea that their insight resulted from having to work through emotional experiences, answered affirmatively (Mean = 5.1; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). When asked if they experienced strong emotion in relation to their insight process, eight participants responded affirmatively and one was unsure. Seven reported experiencing negative emotion (3 = Often, and 4 = Sometimes), and eight reported experiencing at least some positive emotion (3 = Often, 5 = Sometimes, and 1 = Rarely).

### *Cluster 3. Reflective Experiential Process Evolves into a New Awareness of Needs Leading to Action*

It appeared that individuals engaged in a self-reflective and interpretive process as they integrated their insight experience and enacted

new ways of responding (see Table 5). All nine participants endorsed this cluster. The first category, *Insight is characterized by increased self-knowledge*, revealed that insight was increased when the participants learned to engage in a deliberately reflexive internal discourse, as can be seen in the following self-reflection.

I learned to talk to myself, to explore and discuss things with myself . . . I don't think I knew how to do it, how to discuss things with myself prior to that insight. . . . You can reach further decisions and development if you do discuss things with yourself. I still want to listen to other peoples' opinions. But there are things I can do after I've discussed them with myself only. Now I am surer that I do the right thing. It's like a strong feeling of self-identity, what your goals are, what you need in order to be happy, what are your real needs. (Participant #9)

This self examination was described within two main forms, described in the categories, *Insight comes from looking back over time and changes in emotion*, and *insight is seen as evolving through experiences*. By

**TABLE 5** Reflective experiential process evolves into new awareness of needs leading to action

Categories and subcategories
<p>Insight is seen as evolving through experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insight developed through reflection upon experiences</li> <li>• Insight came from others' actions: Realizing you don't have control</li> <li>• Experiences contributing to insight can vary</li> <li>• Insight seen as a process: Evolving through experience</li> </ul>
<p>Insight is characterized by increased self-knowledge</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insight changes beliefs about self or situation</li> <li>• Insight comes from experience &amp; thought process</li> <li>• Insight increased when learned to talk and explore with self</li> </ul>
<p>Insight comes from looking back over time and changes in emotion</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insight requires time and emotional change</li> <li>• Insight presents a difficult path to salvation</li> <li>• Life before the insight is seen as faulty</li> <li>• Reflections on the change since negative memories before the insight</li> </ul>
<p>Results of insight: new awareness of needs and possibilities</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insight followed by allowance for other possibilities</li> <li>• A change occurred in my outlook on life</li> <li>• Insight leads to recognizing new needs</li> <li>• Decision making came from the insight</li> </ul>

observing their own experiences and interactions with others, individuals tested out their insights and refined them. One participant elaborates.

People have to ultimately own the situation at hand, whatever it is that's happening . . . you just kind of reflect back on something that has happened to you, and you make comparisons from five years ago and now you think about what happened or how you got to where you are now and I think you formulate an explanation. (Participant #7)

Interviewees continued to make before-and-after comparisons for a long time after the insight first arose. Also, they analyzed the shifts in their own emotional responses, making meaning from their process. One interviewee described her decision to embrace her pain, and to be “outside of any relationship. I had to be totally alone. I went through a tough period after that, a real hard one. I knew it's like a Via Dolorosa that I had to take . . . the path of pain” (Participant #9). It may be that in construing their pain as purposeful and deliberate, they were better able to undergo the struggle to work through the emotional turmoil described in the preceding cluster. During this process, participants described a process of attributing negative emotions attached to memories before the insights which led to an understanding of their preinsight needs as a faulty or flawed.

The category, *Results of insight: New awareness of needs or possibilities*, described how participants felt that the knowledge they gained as a result of their self-reflection led them to make changes in their life. As their insights pointed to new needs, the interviewees recognized new behavioral and developmental possibilities and accompanying obstacles. “I also learned that change isn't so easy. Really, or being comfortable with the change . . . having the emotional change coexist or occur at the same time as the insight. . . . Sometimes, the time it takes for emotional change may take a little longer” (Participant #4). As they became more aware of the process of personal change, they described altering their outlook on life and feeling freer to make new decisions.

When asked to comment, most of the respondents agreed that the insight arose after an intellectual process of thinking about the contrast between a new experience and old assumptions (Mean = 4.9; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). One respondent stressed that it arose as an emotional revelation, so “experiential reflection” might better describe this process. In addition, the insights tended to bring about a feeling of certainty about the type of action they wanted to take in their lives. Although one respondent experienced a period of uncertainty, three

reported an improved sense of direction, and five indicated that, after the insight, they “knew just what to do.”

*Cluster 4. Insight Led to the Development of Accepting Relationships in Place of Nonaccepting Ones*

The categories in this cluster describe the process of seeking relationships that were supportive of the transformations that unfolded after their insights led participants to a greater sense of self-awareness (see Table 6). All participants contributed units to this cluster, which suggested that the insights helped interviewees to better identify their needs in interpersonal relationships. This new clarity allowed participants to improve existing relationships, decide to abandon unfulfilling relationships, and to place greater value on accepting relationships.

The category, *Need for intimacy leads to increase in valuing and effort in relationships* signified that, for some, insight can help to bring about greater sharing with friends. Six interviewees described an increased need for intimacy, during the insight process, that led to their reevaluating the importance of their personal relationships. For instance, Participant #9 described growing need for friendship emerging from her decision to leave her partner and become independent, “The main thing you’d see [after the insight] is that I am being more sociable, making new friends. Not attached to [just] this one person any more. I realized that I needed more friends, a large group of friends. During that time I built it. I built my circle of friends. That’s a breakthrough.”

**TABLE 6** Insight led to development of accepting relations in place of nonaccepting ones

Categories and subcategories
Need for intimacy leads to increase in valuing and effort in relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insight brings about more sharing or closeness with friends</li> <li>• Family: supportive and relationships are closer</li> </ul>
Increased interpersonal distance when others can’t accept the change in beliefs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friends and family are patronizing or are hurt by my change</li> <li>• Pride or lack of trust makes me hesitant to seek intimacy with others</li> <li>• Changing lifestyle creates distance in relationships</li> </ul>
Spirituality brings about insight and change <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spirituality helps overcome trauma</li> <li>• Justice will be served by God in the end</li> <li>• Insight seen as coming from God</li> </ul>

Relationships were improved in a number of ways. Some interviewees described developing a great appreciation for their family that stood by them during traumatic periods of readjustment. Other interviewees described an increased need to convey their insight to similar others. For instance, after realizing that she didn't need to allow her ambitions to be bound by her history of poverty, one interviewee began to share her "insight with other people who seem to be struggling similarly. . . . I get people to see that I've been there at the bottom and the only way to go from there is up" (Participant #7).

The category, *There can be an increase in distance in relationships as beliefs change when self/others can't accept change*, was endorsed by eight of the nine participants. Although many participants described increased connection in relationship, relationships could be negatively affected by the insight as well. Participants felt that there were many personal costs associated with difficulties in reconciling prior relationships with the changes in themselves. As an example, Participant #6 described the shift that resulted from her the emigration to the United States succinctly, "My family considers me a foreigner up to a point, so I guess that is a cost."

For some interviewees, the distance was due to others who disapproved of their decision or who couldn't understand the changes brought about by the insight. The insight caused some people, however, to initiate a social withdrawal. Participant #2 discussed the process of becoming more socially cautious as a result of the insight due to a robbery; "I guess it changed me in a way. I get nervous in large crowds and being out in the dark on my own. . . . I'm totally aware of my surroundings now. . . . I've become less trusting of strangers and won't open the door to a stranger." Still other interviewees described intertwined processes of increased intimacy and distance, as they became more comfortable embracing the accepting relationships in their lives and allowing the nonaccepting relationships to fall aside. The integration of the insight appeared to provide the strength to select those relationships that allowed them to be authentic.

For some, these relational changes were not only interpersonal, but spiritual as well. For Participant #2 this shift was particularly important. After a traumatic attack she was able to find comfort in her religion that was difficult to find interpersonally as her trust in others had been so shaken. Her belief allowed her to strengthen a sense of closeness with her family and also to trust that God was caring for her and would ensure that her attacker was jailed and punished eventually.

Most participants endorsed that they had "more people in your life who truly accept you for who you are now than you did before the insight" (Mean = 5.1; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). Four interviewees

reported being closer to family and friends, two indicated that they were closer to some individuals, but more distant from others, and three did not report a change in intimacy.

*Cluster 5. New Understanding of Their Interpersonal World Generates a Changed Sense of Control, Self-Reliance and Possibility*

After the insight experience had been reflected upon and integrated, in addition to shifts in their interpersonal relationships, the participants reported being more in control of other spheres of their lives. Participants indicated that their reconstrued understanding of the world prompted them to adjust their level of self-reliance, their need for control over external circumstances, and their behavioral attempts to meet their needs. All nine participants contributed meaning units to this cluster (see Table 7).

As their new construction was internalized, their past came to be viewed as guided by a misconstrual of how self-reliant they should be. They described becoming free of self-imposed expectations and constraints. At times, a change in self-control evolved effortlessly. One participant described the change in her mothering style; "I was not aware on the front end that I was not screaming anymore. . . . The insight provided everything I needed. . . . It kind of reordered my foundation. Priorities changed. . . . Everything was just totally different after that, and it was all just more positive" (Participant #1).

As the understanding of their interpersonal interactions changed, they were able to experiment with innovative responses. Although some interviewees realized that they could depend upon others more,

**TABLE 7** New understanding of the world generates a changed sense of control and possibility

Categories and subcategories
Insight leads to a more adaptive interdependence <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insight leads to a better understanding of self and world</li> <li>• Becoming more independent</li> <li>• Accepting the limits of control in life, allow self to be more dependent</li> </ul>
Insight lets me seek a desired lifestyle: More control to shape my life <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Insight changes behavior due to the reflection</li> <li>• Becoming better able to seek out what is desirable</li> <li>• After insight: Free to express self regardless of others' judgments</li> <li>• Physically felt better after insight and changes</li> </ul>

and others realized that they should be more independent, all felt that their insight allowed them to become more adaptive and better equipped to cope within their reconstrued world. They were able to implement changes in their lives and many experienced an accompanying sense of empowerment.

It's amazing how I approach life and I, I see how I'm different. . . . In terms of coping with things. . . . [I used to feel] anxiety, panic, um, frustration. Sometimes anger, you know. I think all of these results from the loss of control in your life. . . . But overcoming those things you feel a sense of relief, you know, a sense of accomplishment. . . . I guess ultimately, I believe that no one has complete control of their lives. I just don't think I need to feel I have that control. . . . [I] feel that bad things happen to good people and that's normal (Participant #7).

As well, participants felt that the insights helped them to identify their interpersonal needs and so gave them permission to seek out what they desired. They were better able to adopt either a more sheltered or risk-taking style—depending on the direction of their insight. Participants described feeling able to seek living conditions that they desired, greater physical health and personal expression. They ascribed choices to themselves, where before they did not exist and could respond to events with greater adaptability, enhancing their self-reliance.

The participants strongly endorsed that the insight helped them to feel more empowered or in control within their lives (Mean = 6.1, 1 = not at all, 7 = very much). They also agreed that the insight altered the way they felt about depending on others (Mean = 6.3; 1 = not at all, 7 = very much).

### **Core Category: Integrating Novelty**

A core category is meant to capture the main theme that ties all other themes in the model together. In this analysis, the core category was, *Integrating novelty: Meeting challenges to interdependence*. This category reflects the interviewees' process of integrating experiences that conflicted with previously held understandings. This process was instigated by the need to overcome the disbelief caused by having foundational premises shaken, forcing the realization that the world can no longer be as it had seemed. After this initial confrontation by an unexpected situation, participants moved through a period of emotionally charged upheaval, which led to their accepting the experience into their world view and, then, generating new relational and behavioral resolutions

based on this new perspective. When asked if this core category fits their experience, the overall responses were affirmative (Mean = 5.7; 1= not at all, 7 = very much).

## DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to develop a model of how people experience transformational insights. Despite the disparate descriptions of the individual insights and the participants' demographics, patterns emerged that pointed to a five-stage insight process. This model of life-changing insight offers a comprehensive understanding of the way insight is experienced by individuals. In keeping with a hermeneutic method of inquiry (see Rennie, 2000 on grounded theory as a form of methodical hermeneutics), this model is presented as an interpretation of this phenomenon, but not as the only possible interpretation. Within this approach, it is understood that it is impossible to completely set aside the concepts, language, and ideas that analysts have available to them. Therefore, researchers' backgrounds are described so the reader can contextualize this interpretation within the researchers' identities. Still, each of the researchers attempted to identify and set aside their biases throughout the analysis so as to limit the influence of preconceptions. The results were grounded in the experiences reported by our participants and were affirmed through processes of interview checks, consensus, and participant feedback, lending greater credibility to the model.

### Insight-Facilitating Conditions

Insight-facilitating circumstances appeared to be ones that forcefully confront individuals with their deficient preconceptions by arousing pain or uncertainty. There is some research that supports this idea that an insight emerges from a distressing event or period. A grounded theory analysis (Swatton & O'Callaghan, 1999) suggested that the construction of "healing stories" emerged from times of struggle to generate insight that inspired hope. Then, as the stories were viewed as sources of inspiration themselves, they began to produce identity transformation. Likewise, Kiecolt (1994) writes about intentional self-change as the product of "critical events"—including an accumulation of stressors, existential crises, or unexpected events. These emergencies have in common the experience of disbelief and distress that initiates the insight process. The findings in this study add to these perspectives

forming a body of support for the personal construct theory understanding of insight. Kelly (1955) described anxiety as “the recognition that the events with which one is confronted lie outside the range of convenience of one’s construct system” (p. 495). These events were thought to herald a strong emotional response as personal constructs are dismantled and rebuilt.

In this study, this anxiety seemed to arise out of traumatic events or longstanding dissatisfaction in primary relationships. This arousal then prompted: (1) the experiencing of strong emotions, (2) reflexive introspection, (3) the enacting of change within relationships, and (4) developing a more adaptive sense of personal control. Although the insight processes relayed appeared to entail certain stages, it was evident that they unfolded in a variety of forms. For some participants, insights appeared in a flash concurrent with a triggering event, while for others, the new awareness was built slowly over time—culminating in an instant or through deeper reflection. The integration of the insight generally took some time, involving difficult personal reflection and emotional flux.

Although the clusters were presented in the order that reflected the typical explanation, it is important to emphasize that the stages identified in this study should not be understood as necessarily following one another chronologically. For some participants, these stages occurred concurrently or in a different sequence. For instance, being denied food at a food bank stimulated an immediate decision to become self-reliant for one participant (Cluster 5), although he continued to express strong emotions of shame and anger (Cluster 2) long afterwards, and even still during the interview. Also, it should be emphasized that this research explicitly sought participants who had experienced a “life-changing” insight. Accordingly, experiences of insight that did not result in significant change are not the subject of this model.

### **Insight as the Moderating of Perceived Control & Dependency**

Insights offer the promise of personal awareness and growth, and, indeed, the insights in this study all were experienced as adaptive, even those delivered in the guise of traumatic events. In Jinks’ (1999) study of psychotherapy clients, he understands their therapeutic change as developing through an increased sense of self-reliance in clients’ lives, stemming from greater confidence, insight, and ability to make decisions and act. In contrast, Kelly (1955) theorized that a wider dis-

person of dependencies is healthier, as dependency constructs would be better able to match resources with needs when the person was able to rely on a wider circle of people. The present study can be seen as reconciling these two perspectives, as interviewees reported changes due to both increased autonomy, as well as the acceptance of their lack of control or greater dependence on others. After the insight, respectively, these participants construed their past personal style as naively dependent or overly autonomous. This change in personal control in either direction was associated with descriptions of increased confidence, awareness and behavioral choices. Shifts towards greater health may depend on the individual's dependency style before the insight.

For instance, as the mother of a cognitively impaired son realized that she could not control everything in his environment, she became more able to accept her son's treatment and condition, and stopped attempting to control her other children's lives as well. The realization that participants could choose to adopt a different dependency style allowed for greater authenticity in relationships. Instead of being overly dependent or controlling, the insight-led participants to recognize and select alternative modes of behavior that allowed them to be more responsive to situations. They were better able to express their needs and to direct their own process of personal development. This finding provides empirical support for those theoretical models that connect insight with the possibility of greater authenticity (e.g., Miller & C'de Baca, 2001; Kiecolt, 1994).

### **The Process of Transformational Insights and Psychotherapy**

The findings in this study are supportive of the mechanisms of change proposed by a variety of therapeutic models. In the proposed model, the initial confrontation with painful and uncertain experiences can position existential insecurities as the motivation for these insights. In each case, foundational beliefs about existence and identity were placed into question by traumatic events and long-term relational distress that heightened the urgency of these concerns—much like an existential therapist might function to stimulate clients' awareness of these central yet distressing issues (e.g., Spinelli, 2000).

At the same time, the second cluster, describing the need to wrestle with the ensuing anxiety that can impede the relinquishing of old beliefs, resonates with both psychodynamic and humanistic approaches. Both approaches use interventions that help clients become aware of, and then relieve, the fears that maintain habitual modes of responding.

For instance, the process experiential approach guides clients to become attuned to their emotional experience, leading to a new awareness of needs that then motivates later action (e.g., Greenberg, Rice & Elliott, 1993). Similarly, a psychodynamic model posits that clients require the ego strength needed to tolerate the anxiety an insight can introduce, and then be prepared to integrate this new awareness (e.g., Boorstein, 1994; Hatcher, 1973). Both describe an emotional upheaval that leads to new understanding.

The deliberate selection of supportive relationships and implementation of new behavioral responses echoes tenets of cognitive-behavioral models of psychotherapy. As participants integrated their insight, they described altering their patterns of thinking to allow for new response possibilities, much as these therapies might prescribe (e.g., Rorer, 1999). Personal construct psychotherapy, alternatively, might emphasize the process of construal that cuts across the stages described. The painful or uncertain circumstances appear to provide the impetus to loosen constructs and begin a process of experimenting with new ideas. The ensuing period of emotional upheaval may indicate that adaptive and maladaptive understandings are being sorted and, through further exploration and testing in the world, the individual commits to a new meaning (e.g., Neimeyer, Prigerson & Davies, 2002).

It may be that psychotherapies function by strategically guiding clients to make shifts in one of the stages of nonfacilitated insight development. Perhaps after processes within one of these stages are developed the other processes may be stimulated naturally, as occurred in the present model of insight. This model of insight has implications for the common factors model of therapy (e.g., Luborsky, 1995), by suggesting that by targeting specific strategies, insight processes can be stimulated to trigger a larger model of change—one that appears to have galvanized itself in these unguided insight processes. Although the insight process or stage that is targeted may differ, the same model may be activated nonetheless. Future research would be required to verify this hypothesis.

In summary, our research extends insight theory by articulating stages in the evolution of transformational insights. Future research based on this experience might test some of the components of this model or the models of change that it suggests. For example, investigators might wish to explore changes before and following insights in relation to the need for control or independence. Although this model offers an understanding of processes at play in the development and integration of insight experiences, it is unlikely that the intrigue about the topic of insight will lessen. Perhaps with a more thorough understanding of the experience of insight, however, these experiences can

become more attainable and the road to integrating their lessons more readily traveled.

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