Traumatic Experiences Yield Changes in the Situation Experience

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Abstract: Much of the research on post-traumatic growth posits that traumatic events may result in positive personality changes in a number of domains. We propose that this growth may occur, at least in part, because of changes in situations that one experiences following a traumatic event. Exposure to these new situations may be directly responsible for changes in individual behaviour and personality. We explore how new situations may be relevant to the study of post-traumatic growth and recommend that future research consider differences in experienced situations. Copyright © 2014 European Association of Personality Psychology

What are the consequences of experiencing a traumatic event? According to Jayawickreme and Blackie (J&B), there is some evidence to suggest that traumatic life events are related to subsequent changes in personality, including traits and behaviour. However, post-traumatic growth may also result in changes in a different part of the ‘personality triad’ (Funder, 2006)—situations. Although we agree with J&B that more research is needed, such as prominent theories on this topic, we suspect that traumatic events lead to changes via internal personality processes (e.g. reappraisal, rumination, meaning-making). However, we also suspect that traumatic life events lead to subsequent changes in situation experiences, and situations matter (Funder & Colvin, 1991; Furr & Funder, 2004; Richard, Bond, & Stokes-Zoota, 2003; Ross & Nisbett, 1991; Sherman, Nave, & Funder, 2010, 2012; Sommers, 2011). That is, the situations we experience day-in and day-out, day after day, affect who we are. For example, an abundance of evidence suggests that personality changes with age, and such age-related changes are suspected to be, in part, due to changes in daily situation experiences (e.g. retirement; Lucas & Donnellan, 2011; Soto, John, Gosling, & Potter, 2011; Srivastava et al., 2003). Thus, it seems hardly a far stretch to think that experience of a traumatic event could lead to a plethora of changes in daily situation experiences, ultimately yielding changes in behaviour and personality.

The target article hints at this possible process: ‘...consider the individual who has lost his or her child to leukemia, and since has committed himself or herself to raising awareness and funds for this worthy cause’ (p. 9). While such a traumatic event probably leads to changes in the way the parent processes information in the social world, it also affects the kinds of situations this person is likely to encounter.

For instance, when the parent wakes up in the morning, the child is no longer there to be greeted for breakfast. They can no longer play together outside on sunny weekends. In other words, there is now a discrepancy between the daily events (i.e. situations) that would (or could) have happened, and those that are now possible. Moreover, the situations the parent would (or could) have experienced are now replaced by new situations, and, as implied in J&B’s example, the parent is now likely to spend that time organizing and attending fundraisers, speaking about the experience to others and perhaps even in hospital cancer wards.

It is wholly possible that these experiences themselves lead to changes in the five domains in which post-traumatic growth is likely to occur (J&B; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). After the death of a child, for example, a parent may experience new situations that are a continuous reminder of the loss. Such situations can be challenging, and overcoming those challenges should yield increased personal strength. Because others recognize the challenges resulting from a traumatic event, the parent is also more likely to experience situations in which he or she is receiving social support. Such experiences of social support likely strengthen interpersonal relationships with close others (e.g. family, friends, support groups, other survivors). Alternatively, the parent may seek out situations that reduce reminders of the loss. Indeed, after experiencing a traumatic event, one may wish to ‘move on with his or her life’, by literally moving to a new location or exploring new opportunities, which both provide different possibilities for one’s life.

Further, it is apparent that experiencing situations where death and sickness are salient can affect one’s spirituality (or lack thereof). Situations that remind individuals of their mortality (e.g. hospitals, funeral homes) may result in strengthened or new religious beliefs or spirituality. Lastly, traumatic events can introduce situations to foster a newfound appreciation for life. A leukaemia patient finally being released from the hospital, for example, must no longer deal with painful chemotherapy or tedious visits from doctors and nurses. Thus, in this sense, the removal of certain (unpleasant) situations may be related to an individual’s greater appreciation for life. These ongoing changes in one’s daily situations may contribute to the overall process of post-traumatic growth.

How could such processes be studied? First, one would need a tool to measure situations. Second, one would need a method for assessing situations experienced both prior to and after a traumatic event. The Riverside Situational Q-Sort (Wagerman & Funder, 2009; Sherman et al., 2010) and its recently identified eight major dimensions (Rauthmann et al., in press) provide such a tool. In addition, experience sampling methods seem ideal for assessing real-life situations experience before and after a traumatic event. Thus, by employing a brief measurement instrument for assessing situations (e.g. Rauthmann & Sherman, under review) with a methodology to measure situations in real-time, perhaps we can begin to investigate the kinds of situations experienced both before and after traumatic events.
Experience of a traumatic event has a cascade of consequences, which include the situations a person subsequently experiences (e.g. a loved one dies so you attend a funeral), and it may be that the experience of these new situations themselves more proximately leads to post-traumatic growth in a variety of domains. We hope that future research considers the role of situational change on post-traumatic growth.

### Assessment of Post-Traumatic Growth

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Abstract: In this comment, I clarify how post-traumatic growth is a form of eudaimonic well-being and discuss future trends in measurement. Copyright © 2014 European Association of Personality Psychology

It is generally the case that fields of scholarship become more methodologically sophisticated as they develop. Exploratory studies first map out the territory. As the field becomes established, funding and resources become more readily available, and new scholars are attracted. Cross-sectional studies give way to longitudinal studies. New measurement tools are developed and refined. This describes the field of post-traumatic growth, which has in the last few years become part of mainstream psychology.

The pioneers of this field of research have swum against the tide of research in establishing conceptual frameworks, measurement tools, and a set of initial findings. The topic of post-traumatic growth was controversial and rightly so as it challenged the pathological focus of mainstream psychology. It questioned how we conceptualize human suffering and how to meet it as practitioners. It looked towards humanistic psychology rather than the illness ideology of contemporary psychology.

With the surge of interest in positive psychology over the past decade, the tide has changed, and scholars in post-traumatic growth are now swimming with it. Two issues stand out for its future development. The first is the conceptualization of growth. The second is the use of retrospective measures.

A question raised is how to conceptualize post-traumatic growth. Previously, I have said that it would be useful to conceptualize post-traumatic growth in terms of already well-defined constructs in order to integrate literatures across seemingly disparate fields.

In terms of the positive psychology literature, post-traumatic growth appears to be a description of an increase in eudaimonic as opposed to hedonic well-being. As such, I have conceptualized post-traumatic growth within the most commonly used framework for eudaimonic well-being—Ryff’s description of psychological well-being as consisting of six domains of self-acceptance, autonomy, purpose, relationships, mastery, and openness. My colleagues and I developed a new questionnaire on the basis of the traditional retrospective style of questionnaire to assess perceptions of change in psychological well-being following adversity.

Respondents in one of our studies completed Ryff’s measure of psychological well-being twice over a period of six months and also at the six-month point the new retrospective measure of psychological well-being asked for in relation to changes as a result of an event. We found the correlation to be \( r = .41, p < .001 \), between retrospective ratings and changes in actual psychological well-being.

Our conclusion was that this association was not so weak that we ought to dismiss perceptions of growth as completely illusory but clearly not strong enough that we should take reports of growth at face value. We explicitly made the point that researchers should clearly distinguish between perceptions of growth and actual growth and whenever possible to measure state scores at several points in time to allow change scores to be calculated (Joseph et al., 2012).

The point however was not that I was suggesting that psychological well-being is the only way to conceptualize growth but that it would be useful to understand posttraumatic growth from the perspective of existing frameworks. Doing so would enable research findings to be more firmly integrated within mainstream psychology. Eudaimonic well-being is one framework currently attracting attention in positive psychology, but one could equally well conceptualize growth from a cognitive restructuring of one’s life story perspective or in terms of constructs drawn from mainstream personality psychology. These are all different ways of conceptualizing growth following adversity from different traditions of research.

Several years ago, the use of retrospective measures was controversial as it was recognized that perceptions of growth do not provide evidence of actual growth. Before and after studies have now shown that post-traumatic growth occurs, so the issue is not whether post-traumatic growth occurs but simply how to best assess it. There is agreement that retrospective measures are less than ideal to assess actual growth, and where possible researchers should assess state scores at several points in time to measures change. Many authors have now made this point, and research is already developing in these directions.

As the literature develops, we will need to recognize that findings from the two forms of assessment need to be regarded separately. As the amount of research builds, we will need to consider what we know about perceptions of growth and what we know about actual growth as two separate questions. What we need is an integrative understanding of how