The Transformed Self: A Narrative Understanding of Posttraumatic Growth

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I knew I reached an emotional bottom that year... but I began making a stable life again, as a more stable, independent person... It was a period full of pain, experimentation, and growth, but in retrospect it was necessary for me to become anything like the woman I am today.

The preceding quote is taken from a middle-aged woman’s narrative account of her most traumatic experience in adulthood. It clearly and vividly demonstrates the close connection between the life narrative and posttraumatic growth, a connection that Tedeschi and Calhoun (this issue) include in their model but do not fully develop. However, they end their stimulating target article by challenging others to pursue this connection: “The overall picture of posttraumatic growth has been sketched. Describing the details of cognitive processing and narrative development will be much more difficult.” Picking up where Tedeschi and Calhoun leave off, we respond to their closing challenge by presenting a more developed and comprehensive analysis of the role of narrative within posttraumatic growth. As the basis for a sense of identity in adulthood (McAdams, 1996), the life story should not be viewed as just one piece of the complex puzzle of posttraumatic growth, as Tedeschi and Calhoun’s process model suggests, but rather as the fundamental frame that holds the entire puzzle together. Specifically, we assert that posttraumatic growth may be best understood as a process of constructing a narrative understanding of how the self has been positively transformed by the traumatic event and then integrating this transformed sense of self into the identity-defining life story. This narrative perspective on posttraumatic growth has important implications for how growth outcomes are assessed in the aftermath of traumatic events, our understanding of the processes that may enhance or limit the possibility for posttraumatic growth over time, and, more broadly, the role of culture in posttraumatic growth.

Assessing Posttraumatic Growth Within Narrative Accounts of Traumatic Events

To assess posttraumatic growth, Tedeschi and Calhoun (this issue) rely mainly on a simple self-report questionnaire that asks people to rate their growth in five domains. Although the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) has yielded some promising results, we believe the questionnaire approach would be well complemented by one that focuses on the presence of growth themes within narrative accounts of traumatic events themselves. Indeed, the analysis of narrative accounts may constitute the most valid way of assessing posttraumatic growth. This may be the case for two reasons. First, if posttraumatic growth develops out of a process of building new schemas in place of the old ones, as suggested by Tedeschi and Calhoun’s model, then it would seem important to assess growth outcomes by examining the extent to which they naturally emerge in the context of a person’s own narrative understanding of the event. In the case of the woman in the opening example, the presence of posttraumatic growth in her story is powerful and convincing because it is expressed in her own words and it is clearly very central to her definition of herself as a positively transformed person. It is possible to imagine that someone could receive a similar PTGI score as this woman but provide a narrative account of a traumatic event in which growth outcomes are far less developed and convincingly connected to identity.

Second, the assessment of posttraumatic growth should be not be constrained by preconceived notions of what constitutes meaningful growth outcomes. Although Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (this issue) five domains may cover the range of growth outcomes typically experienced in response to trauma, it is certainly possible to imagine that a person could experience a sense of growth in an area that does not fit neatly into one of the five categories assessed in the self-report measure. For example, the woman in the opening quote mentions becoming a more stable person, a characteristic that for her may be experienced as growth, even though it does not fit well into any of the five domains. Additionally, a person could experience growth outcomes in one of the preestablished areas but express it in a way that is unique to his or her circumstances, the particular type of traumatic event in question, personality characteristics, and, as we discuss further later, the cultural narratives that are available as a person makes sense of the traumatic event. Indeed, much can be learned about the different types of growth through analysis of their distinct manifestations in individual life stories. Tedeschi and Calhoun argue that the essence of posttraumatic growth is its inherently transformational quality. The narrative assessment of
posttraumatic growth captures the person’s own understanding of positive self-transformation without limiting the possibilities for the different forms of growth that may emerge within people’s lives.

The Role of Narrative Processes in the Development of Posttraumatic Growth

Tedeschi and Calhoun (this issue) importantly argue that posttraumatic growth is not only an outcome but also a process that unfolds over time in the aftermath of a traumatic event. They assert that for the process to begin, a traumatic event must first be intense enough to challenge deeply and even destroy central schemas, goals, and assumptions that give life meaning and purpose—features of identity that we see as rooted in how people narrate their life stories. From this perspective, the question of how people respond to the identity challenge posed by a traumatic event—the key to whether or not growth occurs—may be best answered through an analysis of how people go about narrating the traumatic event and making sense of its impact on the self. Recent research on individual differences in narratives of traumatic events supports this perspective. In two studies (King, Scollon, Ramsey, & Williams, 2000; Pals, 2000), narrative accounts of traumatic events told by adults were coded on a series of themes that, when factor analyzed, yielded two distinct dimensions of individual differences in the narrative processing of traumatic events: (a) the extent to which individuals openly acknowledged and examined the deeply challenging, “disenchanting” impact of the event on the self, and (b) the extent to which they constructed a positive ending for the story that provided coherence and resolution. Interestingly, evidence from both studies suggests that posttraumatic growth may develop out of the combination of these two processes operating within the narrative construction of the traumatic event: Pals (2000) showed that the theme of positive self-transformation was the most developed in narratives that scored high on both factors, and King et al. (2000) showed that the interaction of these two narrative processes predicted stress-related growth 2 years later. How is it that these two narrative processes lead to posttraumatic growth over time? We suggest that they combine to create a two-step narrative process in which the person comes to understand the self as positively transformed by the traumatic event.

The first step in the proposed narrative path toward posttraumatic growth is to acknowledge openly and examine deeply the disenchanting impact of the traumatic event on the self. What exactly does this narrative process involve? Consistent with Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (this issue) theory, we expect that the critical aspect of this narrative process is the cognitive processing of the negative emotional impact of the traumatic event. The negative emotion generated by a traumatic event is what signals to the person that a significant aspect of self has been lost or damaged, and it is therefore this negative emotion that must first be acknowledged and examined to create the potential for new aspects of self to emerge (e.g., Magai & Nusbaum, 1996). Providing support for this idea, Pals (2000) showed that individuals whose narratives openly examined the impact of the event on the self also described a broader range of emotional responses and included a greater focus on the negative emotion surrounding the traumatic event than individuals whose narratives were more minimizing of the impact of the event on the self. It appears that those individuals who narrate traumatic events with an emphasis on the challenging impact of the event seem to embrace the negative emotional response to the traumatic event and use it as a potential source for new ways of thinking about the self, thus paving the way for posttraumatic growth to emerge. In contrast, those who narrate traumatic events in a way that minimizes the impact of the event on the self may be using the narrative process to distance the self from negative emotions, therefore limiting the potential for posttraumatic growth. This last point is noteworthy because it suggests that if posttraumatic growth fails, it may not simply be a function of the absence of positive outcomes following the event; it may also result from an active resistance to apprehending and working through negative emotion within the life story.

The second step on the narrative path to posttraumatic growth is to construct a positive ending to the story, but not just any kind of positive ending will do. The ending should affirm and explain how the self has been positively transformed. The woman in the opening quote vividly demonstrates how first embracing the negative emotional impact of the event on the self sets the stage within the narrative for the construction of a growth-promoting positive ending. First, she describes how she knew she had reached an “emotional bottom” in her life and that the whole time was a period that was “full of pain.” Rather than sending her narrative in a negative direction, however, the negative emotional event became the opening act in a transformative and redemptive sequence. Indeed, the woman saw the negative emotional impact of the event and her struggle through it as “necessary” for her growth. Thus, when a person first acknowledges the challenging impact of the traumatic event on the self, it is possible for the positive ending to become an enduring sense of positive self-transformation within the identity-defining life story.

What factors may influence a person’s narrative response when confronted with the identity challenge posed by a traumatic event? Many of the factors outlined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (this issue) in their the-
ory of posttraumatic growth may be meaningfully understood within the broader theoretical framework provided by the narrative construction of identity, a process that is, by definition, a constant interaction between personal and contextual factors (McAdams, 1996). First, personality traits may influence how people narrate traumatic events. For example, Tedeschi and Calhoun report that openness to feelings, activity, and positive emotions were three of the specific traits within the five-factor model that correlate with their measure of posttraumatic growth. These three traits fit well with the narrative process described earlier—the person is first open to processing the emotional impact of the event and then actively works to feel positive again through transforming the self.

Second, several of the more contextual factors described by Tedeschi and Calhoun (this issue) may be understood as influencing the narrative construction of the traumatic event. More specifically, such factors as talking with others, praying, and writing about the event are all acts that involve putting the trauma into words and may therefore serve to facilitate narrative processing and move it in the direction of positive self-transformation. For example, Tedeschi and Calhoun cite a study by Ulrich and Lutgendorf in which college students who engaged in a journaling exercise later reported higher levels of posttraumatic growth if they had specifically been instructed to cognitively process the emotional aspects of their traumatic experiences. Although some people may have the personality traits that naturally lead them to engage in this process (e.g., openness to feelings), this study importantly demonstrates that when people are given explicit instructions, they may be able to engage in narrative processes that lead them to see positive changes within themselves as a result of the traumatic event. Finally, talking with others may have a similar effect on narrative construction; researchers have recently argued that how others respond when people talk about emotionally significant events in their lives can have an important effect on how these events are remembered, interpreted, and narrated as part of identity (Pasupathi, 2001; Thorne, 2000).

The Role of Cultural Narratives in Posttraumatic Growth

A comprehensive understanding of how posttraumatic growth is narrated within the self-defining life story needs to consider carefully and critically the role of culture. Life stories are constructed, told, and understood according to the narrative assumptions, parameters, frames, and taboos that prevail within a particular culture (Rosenwald & Ochberg, 1992). Cultures provide implicit guidelines for what constitutes a tellable, coherent narrative. Although narrative deviations from the canonical patterns are sometimes celebrated as bold and innovative, more often than not they are discouraged, dismissed, or even censored. Similarly, stories that best exemplify those most cherished narrative forms are easy to tell and easy to affirm. Narrative tastes, furthermore, change over time, even within a given culture. The story of the overworked professional woman who struggles to meet her family’s needs while bringing home a good paycheck has become rather common in contemporary, middle-class society. In a sense, it is now accepted as part of the psycholiterary canon. Just 50 years ago, however, this kind of American life story would have seemed unrealistic and highly problematic, or at best odd and avant garde.

One does not need to go back as far as 50 years, however, to find a time in American society when the telling of trauma was considered odd and avant garde. Outside the confessional and off the psychoanalytic couch, middle-class Americans in the 1950s and 1960s rarely narrated their traumatic events, if most sociological and cultural analyses are to be believed. However, in the past 25 years or so, these kinds of tellings have become more and more common—in 12-step programs, popular psychology books, memoirs and autobiographies, best-selling fiction, television talk shows, and on the Internet (see, e.g., Kaminer, 1992). Educated Americans today expect to hear stories about how personal trauma leads to growth. They find these stories especially compelling and coherent. We would argue, in fact, that the utility and the power of Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (this issue) approach are due, in part, to the timely way it addresses current concerns in our culture.

Missing from Tedeschi and Calhoun’s (this issue) model is a consideration of the ways that cultural narratives shape people’s understanding and expectations of posttraumatic growth. Instead, one might read their model to suggest that the kinds of positive outcomes captured on the PTGI are universal. The idea that good things may come from bad events may be common in many societies, but we strongly suspect that the kinds of “bads” and the kinds of “goods” that may be part of the sequence vary substantially from one society to the next and over historical time. Some societies may consider some traumas so bad or so debilitating that efforts to construct stories of subsequent growth may be seen as doomed from the start, senseless, meaningless, and never-to-be believed or affirmed. Indeed, a careful cultural analysis of middle-class American discourse on trauma and growth might reveal much in this regard—for example, what kinds of events Americans deem the best candidates for transformation (physical disability, divorce), and what kinds may be so devastating that no comeback should be expected (death of a child).

What kinds of growth are possible? Again, we believe that culture calls the shots. Tedeschi and Calhoun
(this issue) identify five domains of posttraumatic growth: changed priorities, warmer relationships, greater personal strength, new paths in life, and spiritual development. Changed priorities and new paths suggest a degree of autonomy and flexibility in the social ecology of life, however, that may be unique to modern, capitalist societies (Giddens, 1991). What new paths in life will a Chinese peasant take after the death of her husband? How likely is it that the fundamentalist father of a suicide bomber will reprioritize his life after the explosion? With respect to spiritual development, we see Tedeschi and Calhoun’s model to reflect the importance of religion and personal spirituality in contemporary American life. For its high levels of church attendance and strong Christian beliefs, the United States is almost unique among modern Western democracies (Sherkat & Ellison, 1999). Religious and spiritual development is not likely to be a strong growth theme in the life stories of young adults living in France, a nation where 1 in 10 citizens attends church more often than once a year.

We are not suggesting that posttraumatic growth is unique to cultural modernity or to contemporary middle-class American society. Rather, we believe that the characteristic growth patterns that can occur in a life, and the ways they are narrated within the self-defining life story, are strongly driven by cultural narratives, which themselves are derived from economic, political, religious, and historical factors that vary widely from one society to the next. Take, for example, the middle-class, American woman featured in the opening quote. She began adult life in the early 1960s, when the prevailing cultural script dictated that a woman construct her life around that of a man.

It is therefore impossible to imagine her narration of her most traumatic time of adulthood—a time that involved the ending of the marriage she had built her life around—without the knowledge that it was told in the late 1980s, after the women’s movement had radically altered the available scripts for women’s lives in this country. With its emphasis on independence, growth, and a strong sense of pride in the woman she has become, this woman’s story clearly echoes some of the central themes of the women’s movement and shows how this time of significant societal and cultural transformation gave American women a new voice to narrate their experiences and affected both the possibility for and thematic quality of posttraumatic growth in women’s lives.

We would add, furthermore, that the very notion of growth—the metaphor of getting bigger, stronger, and better over time—carries a lot of cultural meaning. It suggests an optimistic, forward-looking, keep-on-moving-upward-and-onward perspective on the human life course—a characteristically American outlook, many would say. From the time of the Puritan settlements, America has been repeatedly described as a land of optimism and opportunity, a place where people can start over, have a second chance, and find growth and fulfillment even after the worst setbacks. In both religious and secular forms, from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Oprah Winfrey, redemption may be one of the strongest themes in all of American cultural history (McAdams, in press). At its essence, redemption is the deliverance from suffering to a positive affective state (McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). In American cultural history, the most common redemptive narratives incorporate the forms of Christian atonement, upward social mobility, emancipation from slavery, escape from authority, and physical and spiritual recovery. Redemptive narratives like these are so much a staple of the American cultural canon that many Americans simply assume that everybody the world over narrates their lives this way. Consequently, the idea of posttraumatic growth may find an especially receptive audience among Americans today, including American clinicians and social scientists.

Conclusion

In sum, we find the concept of posttraumatic growth to be an extraordinarily exciting and fruitful idea in psychology today. We tend to conceive of posttraumatic growth within a broad context of narrative and culture. Narrative methodologies are likely to be extremely valuable for the scientific study of posttraumatic growth. More than that, though, we believe posttraumatic growth itself to be an identity-making narrative process. Integral parts of the process include the extent to which people fully apprehend and work through the traumatic event and the extent to which they construct a positive and coherent ending to the story through seeing the self as positively transformed. Finally, we believe that trauma-telling is strongly shaped by cultural narratives, which themselves stem from economic, political, religious, ideological, and historical factors that are likely to be unique to a given society. A full understanding of posttraumatic growth requires a serious consideration of the role of culture.

Notes

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The Notion of Growth Following Stressful Life Experiences: Problems and Prospects

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That growth can follow stressful experiences seems obvious. As a researcher who has heard or read the stories of hundreds of people describing their positive changes following stressful life events, as a therapist who has worked with clients dealing with a variety of challenging circumstances, and as a human being who has experienced a variety of stressful experiences in my own life, I am quite convinced that stress-related growth exists. Stressful situations are often transformative (Saakvitne, Tennen, & Affleck, 1998), and, for some people, sometimes, positive change and growth are part of their transformation. In considering stress-related growth, a variety of intriguing questions arise, many of which Tedeschi and Calhoun (this issue) introduce: Who experiences growth? What kinds of growth do people experience? How is growth achieved? What does growth mean in terms of individuals’ adjustment? As enticing and as potentially important as stress-related growth may be, however, there are many problems in the current state of research on this phenomenon that must be addressed to advance our understanding in a rigorously empirical way. This article identifies some of the major problems in this area and suggests some potential ways that they can be addressed.

Defining Growth

Perhaps the most essential question is what is meant by stress-related growth? In assessing growth, some researchers have simply asked individuals how much they have grown as a result of experiencing a situation identified as stressful (e.g., Park & Cohen, 1993; Tomich & Helgeson, 2002). This question presumably assesses a general perception of having experienced positive change. Others researchers have developed scales of perceived benefits or growth (e.g., Behr, Murphy, & Summers, 1992; McMillen & Fisher, 1998; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996), allowing for the assessment of positive change in a variety of areas. Still, the desire to measure growth in a simple way should not preclude researchers from

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1 In this article, the term stress-related growth is preferred to the term posttraumatic growth for two reasons: First, in the psychological literature, trauma refers to severe events or conditions involving perceived threat to life or bodily integrity, whereas, as Tedeschi and Calhoun (this issue) note, the phenomenon under study encompasses a broader range of stressful events. Research has documented growth from many stressful encounters that may not have reached the level of trauma, but that seem to fall under the purview of the phenomenon described here. Second, in deference to those individuals who have truly suffered traumatic experiences, I reserve the term trauma only to describe situations that truly are.