The self-regulatory processes and outcomes of posttraumatic growth

Eranda Jayawickreme & Laura Blackie
Wake Forest University

February 8th 2012
Overview

- Definitions
- Evidence for PTG
- Theories and mechanisms
- Controversies
- PTG as self-regulation
  - Process
  - Outcome

Is it really either/or?
Definitions

• Positive psychological changes experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances

  (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p.1)

• Terms used
  - Benefit-Finding
  - Positive Adjustment
  - Posttraumatic Growth
  - Adversarial Growth
  - Stress-Related Growth
But we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces character

Romans 5:5
The Adversity Hypothesis (Haidt, 2006)

- The Weak Version
  - Adversity CAN lead to growth, strength, joy and self-improvement

- The Strong Version
  - We MUST endure adversity to grow
    - At the extreme end is the proposition that particular heights of the human experience, what some call thriving, are known ONLY by those who have run the gauntlet (Ryff & Singer, 2003)
Evidence for PTG

- More than half of people who experience a traumatic life event report some degree of positive outcome (Haidt, 2006)

- Important Domains
  - Self-concept
  - Relationships with social networks
    - More intimate relationships with family and friends
    - Pruning of unsatisfying relationships
  - Personal growth and life priorities, often lead to changes in activities
  - Quality of daily life experience. Stress in context of social support is more likely to lead to positive outcomes.
Combat-related PTG

Suggestive Evidence:

  - Strongest predictor = ability to make a few of one’s own decisions.

- Segal (1986): positive effects among American POWs held by N. Vietnam who believed they had some sense of control over their environment.
Combat-related PTG

- Speed, Engdahl, and colleagues (1989)
  - 47% of 62 former World War II POW’s reported that they had benefited in some way from their POW experience.
  - Benefits included greater appreciation for freedom, a strong national defense, family, friends, and food.
  - Soldiers who were ranked more highly at the time of capture were more likely to report perceptions of benefit.
  - Indicators of the severity of the POW experience and diagnoses of anxiety, depression, and PTSD were not related to PTG.
Sledge, Boydstun, & Rabe (1980): 221 USAF repatriated prisoners of the Vietnam War and 341 USAF pilots and navigators who were not POW’s, three years after repatriation.

- 61% of USAF repatriated Vietnam War POWs perceived their imprisonment experience as beneficial.
- POW’s reported significantly greater increases in desirable attitudes and behavior, (e.g., patience, ability to differentiate the important from the trivial);
- Significantly greater decreases in undesirable attitudes and behavior (e.g. temper, pessimism) than controls, as a result of their Vietnam experiences.
PTG Themes in Interviews

- Values/philosophy
  - Unimportance of money
  - Honesty/integrity
  - Freedom
  - Obligation
  - Giving to others
- Self-concept
  - Self-knowledge
  - Patience
  - Self-reliance
- Interpersonal relations
  - Compassion
Domains of Posttraumatic Growth

- Greater appreciation for life and changed sense of priorities – “hope”
- Warmer, more intimate relationships with others – “intimacy with one or more family members”
- A greater sense of personal strength – “sense of confidence”
- Recognition of new possibilities or paths for one’s life – “feeling that my life has purpose”
- Spiritual development
Wisdom

- The ability to balance reflection and action, weigh the known and the unknowns in life, be better able to accept the paradoxes of life, and to more openly and satisfactorily address the fundamental questions of human existence.

Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999
PTSD and the “Inauthentic Self”

- PTSD can be seen in terms of a shattered, inauthentic self (Joseph & Linley, 2005)
  - Distress $\rightarrow$ self-alienation
- Self-alienation and accepting external influence lead to a worsening of symptoms (Ehlers et al., 2000)
Organismic Valuing Theory (Joseph & Linley, 2005)

- Integration of positive psychology into psychosocial models of posttraumatic growth
- Growth as a universal human tendency
- Response to Adversity
  - Assimilation
  - Negative Accommodation
  - Positive Accommodation
Figure 1.2  Organismic Valuing Theory of Growth through Adversity, Schematically Represented
Theoretical Principles of Organismic Valuing Theory

- Completion tendency
- Accommodation versus assimilation
- Meaning as comprehensibility versus meaning as significance
  - Negative accommodation ➔ hopelessness & helplessness
  - Positive accommodation ➔ strengths and resilience
  - Psychological well-being
Individual Differences within Organismic Valuing Theory

- Degree of disparity between previous assumptive world and the trauma-related information
- Prior personality
- Concordance with the organismic valuing process
- Posttrauma social environment
Posttraumatic Growth Outcomes

- Posttraumatic growth is related to
  - less depression
  - more positive well-being
  - more intrusive and avoidant thoughts about the stressor.

- Posttraumatic growth is unrelated to
  - anxiety
  - global distress
  - quality of life
  - subjective reports of physical health.

(Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006)
Posttraumatic Growth Outcomes

- Low scores on optimism and pessimism → better physical health
- Ethnic minorities more likely to experience posttraumatic growth
- Focus on benefits AND costs of a particular stress leads to increase in psychological resources over time.
Potential Mechanisms

- **Taylor- Cognitive adaptation theory:** we produce self-enhancing cognitions
  - Selective appraisals

- **Aldwin- Deviation amplification model**
  - Amplifies small changes, producing something like a cascade effect seen in neurohormonal stress responses
  - Explains change as opposed to mere homeostasis

- **Hobfoll- Conservation of resources theory**
  - Individuals have a primary goal to preserve and protect those resources that they value.

- **Miechenbaum- Stress Inoculation approach**
  - Less extreme stress earlier in life make us more resilient later on
Do Reports of Growth Reflect Change?

- In some cases, perceived growth may represent motivated illusions
- In other cases, however, perceived growth reflects actual positive changes
- Focus of JTF project
Self-Regulation

The ways in which people control and direct their own actions (Fiske & Taylor, 1991)
Self-regulation and PTG

- The opportunity highlighted by the concept of posttraumatic growth is that the shock and adaptive shift caused by trauma can provide a platform for conscious intentional reevaluation of how one regulates oneself somatically, cognitively, affectively, and in relationships (Ford, Tennen, & Albert, 2008, p. 317).

- Research is needed to identify the self-regulatory capacities that increase the likelihood of posttraumatic resistance, resilience and growth (p. 319).
Self-regulation and PTG

- It may be that persons who are highest of these dimensions of coping capacity [i.e. resilience, hardiness, optimism, and sense of coherence] will report relatively little growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, p.4)

- PTG as psychosocial developmental process?
Challenges to PTG Theories

- Lack of evidence that growth occurs later in the adjustment period
  - Cognitive processing not involved in growth
- Benefit-finding as a possible personality characteristic
- Non-constructivist views of growth
- Benefit-finding as explanation for one’s temperament
- Cultural support for benefits following adversity
- Benefit-finding vs. temporal comparison
Process or Outcome?

- Self-regulation as a PTG outcome?
  - Values
  - Relationships

- Self-regulation as a PTG-related process?
  - Ford, Tennen, & Albert, 2008
Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010

The diagram illustrates the relationship between cumulative lifetime adversity and z scores across different domains of psychological distress. The x-axis represents cumulative lifetime adversity, with categories ranging from low to high. The y-axis shows z scores, which range from -0.3 to 0.2. Three lines represent different measures:

- **Global Distress**
- **Functional Impairment**
- **Life Satisfaction**
- **PTS Symptoms**

The graph shows how these measures correlate with cumulative lifetime adversity, indicating patterns of distress and satisfaction across varying levels of adverse experiences.
Prevalence of Trauma and PTSD in Men and Women in the US

Kessler, 1995
Tedeschi’s Proposed Components of a Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) Psychoeducation or Intervention Module

- Understanding Trauma Response as a Precursor to PTG
- Emotional Regulation Enhancement
- Constructive Self-Disclosure
- Creating a Trauma Narrative with PTG Domains
- Developing Life Principles that are Resilient in the Face of Challenges
Discussion

- How is self-regulation important in the PTG process?
  - Coping in the wake of adversity
  - Coping with shattered assumptions

- Resilience vs. PTG
  - How clear is the theoretical distinction between the two?

- PTG as positive personality change
  - What distinguishes PTG from “normal” growth?
Thank you!