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Positive effects of communal coping in the aftermath of a collective trauma: The case of the 2010 Chilean earthquake



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Abstract A cross-sectional study examines the relationship between participation in secular demonstrations, spiritual rituals, and communal coping, as well as the question whether these strategies might serve as triggers of post-traumatic growth, and enhance social well-being. A communal coping scale, showing satisfactory structural validity, was administered to a quasi-random sample ($N=517$) of people affected by an earthquake in Chile in 2010. The results indicated that adaptive forms, such as communal reappraisal, regulated emotional expression, communal distraction, and communal searching for social support, were associated with social well-being (SWB) and post-traumatic growth (PTG). Participation in spiritual rituals was specifically related to communal reappraisal and contributed to post-traumatic growth. On the other hand, participation in secular collective gatherings also reinforced post-traumatic growth, as well as social well-being, but not through communal reappraisal. Overall, this study confirmed social functions of collective ritualized activities, which through the reinforcement of in-group interaction, foster individual post-traumatic growth and social well-being of people affected by a collective trauma, like an earthquake. Results are discussed in the framework of a collective positive psychology approach on micro- and macro-social processes of coping and their implications for social well-being.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

Afrontamiento
Comunal;
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Colectivo;
Rituales sociales;
Crecimiento
postraumático;
Bienestar Social

Efectos positivos del afrontamiento comunal del trauma colectivo: el caso del terremoto de Chile en 2010

Resumen Este estudio transversal examinó las relaciones entre la participación en rituales seculares, rituales religiosos y las estrategias de afrontamiento comunal. Además se evaluó el papel de estas respuestas colectivas como potenciadores del crecimiento postraumático y del bienestar social. Una escala de afrontamiento comunal fue administrada a una muestra cuasi-aleatoria (N = 517) de personas afectadas por el terremoto en Chile en 2010. Los resultados indicaron que las formas adaptativas de afrontamiento comunal, tales como la reevaluación, la expresión emocional regulada, la distracción y la búsqueda de apoyo social se asociaron al bienestar social y al crecimiento postraumático. Se constató que la participación en rituales también reforzó el crecimiento postraumático y el bienestar social, de una manera directa en el caso de rituales seculares, y a través de la reevaluación comunal en el caso de rituales religiosos. Globalmente, los resultados confirmaron las funciones sociales de las actividades colectivas ritualizadas, las cuales mediante el refuerzo de las interacciones entre los miembros de los grupos o comunidades aumentan el crecimiento postraumático y el bienestar social de los afectados por un trauma colectivo como un terremoto. Los resultados se discuten desde la perspectiva de la psicología positiva colectiva, acentuando el papel de los procesos sociales de afrontamiento en el bienestar social.

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Introduction

A traumatic situation can temporarily or permanently alter people's capacity to cope and their concept of self, stripping life of meaning and pleasure (Cury, 2007). It can break the bonds in the relationship between a person and their community and the firmly held belief that people are good and that their actions contribute to the common good (Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Keyes, 1998). Nevertheless, it has been widely observed that traumatic experiences present an opportunity for significant growth (Helgeson, Reynolds, & Tomich, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). People tend to mitigate the effects of the disaster with their capacity for organization, communication and social support. These interactive communal processes promote an increase of positive affectivity and a decrease of negativity, improvement of positive relationships with others and reinforcement of psychosocial well-being in general (Gasparre, Bosco, & Bellelli, 2010; Tang, 2006). Defending common interests helps people to find meaning in the experience they just have had (Silver, Boon, & Stones, 1983; Tait & Silver, 1989) and to reinforce positive beliefs about themselves, others and society (Poulin, Silver, Gil-Rivas, Holman, & McIntosh, 2009).

Furthermore, although studies on traumatic experiences of natural disasters have placed more emphasis on the negative and psychological sides than on the positive and psychosocial ones (Bonanno, Brewin, Kaniasty, & La Greca, 2010), people's reactions are often collective and of positive valence. In a survey held after the earthquake in Chile in 2010 in over 22,000 homes from the affected provinces, 50.5% of respondents declared to use individual strategies, while 14.2% collective ones. Collective strategies were more commonly used in the most affected regions (39.8% Biobío and Maule 23.6%). Regarding the type of activity, 39.3% of the people organized themselves collectively in order to

get water and food supplies and 37.9% did so to increase safety in their community (Larrañaga & Herrera, 2011). Furthermore, 89.8% indicated that they had received support from neighbours, both instrumental, like receiving water, food, firewood (44.1%), protection and shelter (46%), and emotional (39.5%) (Díaz, 2011).

Therefore, we argue that collective responses as communal coping and participation in collective ritualized activities are functional because they reduce the impact of trauma (Villagrán, Reyes, & Włodarczyk, 2014) and may foster intrapersonal, interpersonal and social positive responses, like increase in altruism, social support, enhanced cohesion, and reinforcement of positive social beliefs and values (Vázquez & Páez, 2011). We will examine the features of collective responses that could explain these positive outcomes.

Communal coping as a collective response

While the research on coping was primarily focused on individuals' capacities to overcome stressful circumstances (Folkman & Lazarus, 1988), natural disasters constitute a context in which individual and group efforts are likely to be combined (Hobfoll, Schroder, & Malek, 2002). Those collective interactions can be conceived as communal coping or strategies adopted by the community to cope with the effects of the event. *Communal coping* is a process in which the appraisal and actions to resolve a problem occur within the context of social relationships. People perceive the stressful event to be "our" problem and responsibility rather than "my" or "their" problem and responsibility (Lyons, Mickelson, Sullivan, & Coyne, 1998). This distinguishes it from coping through social support, which is generally measured in terms of individual strategies that are applied with the help of others or for others (Little,

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