



Perceptions of positive and negative changes for posttraumatic growth and depreciation: Judgments from Japanese undergraduates



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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Posttraumatic growth
Posttraumatic depreciation
Gender differences
Culture

ABSTRACT

The present study examined whether psychological changes after trauma, operationally defined as posttraumatic growth (PTG) and posttraumatic depreciation (PTD), were judged as positive or negative within a sample of Japanese adults. Furthermore, potential gender differences in perceptions for changes in PTG and PTD were also assessed. Undergraduate students ($n = 257$, $M_{age} = 19.91$) completed a questionnaire that included 50 items from the expanded versions of the Posttraumatic Growth and Depreciation Inventories. Items operationally defined as PTG were generally agreed upon as positive changes. Conversely, items operationally defined as PTD varied considerably in terms of agreement regarding negative changes. Some items (e.g., appreciate each day less than I did before) showed high agreement for perceptions of negative changes, whereas others (e.g., find it difficult to clarify priorities about what is important in life) were more often perceived as positive changes. Gender differences were also observed with only slight fluctuations in agreement for most PTG items but with wider discrepancies among PTD items. These results suggest that operationally defined PTD may reflect a linguistic opposite to PTG rather than a conceptual or semantic contrast. Furthermore, cultural and gender values may need to be considered when defining psychological changes resulting from trauma.

1. Introduction

Although there is a well-established literature base linking trauma with negative symptomatology, studies have demonstrated that individuals also experience positive changes resulting from psychological struggles with highly stressful life events, often referred to as “posttraumatic growth” (PTG; [Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995](#)). Their model describes emotional and cognitive processes related to PTG, including elements such as pre-trauma characteristics, disrupted core beliefs, rumination, social support, and wisdom. This model has been developed to explain individual differences in PTG that are generally considered to reflect personal growth or positive psychological changes in response to distressing life events. These positive changes are typically assessed across five domains: recognizing personal strength, finding new possibilities and opportunities, experiencing positive changes in relationships, appreciating life more, and experiencing positive religious changes ([Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996](#)). In more recent years, the religious domain has been expanded to include a broader range of spiritual and existential changes that may also reflect positive growth

within individuals ([Tedeschi, Cann, Taku, Senol-Durak, & Calhoun, 2017](#)). Owing to the fact that changes in these categories are often subjective, PTG is often assessed by the degree to which the individual has experienced the various positive changes.

PTG has offered unique insights into individual differences in reactions to traumatic experiences, elucidating patterns to determine and predict the degree to which the person experiences the phenomena. Trauma can produce a disturbance in individuals' cognitive understanding of the world around them and themselves in which the cognitive processes allow them to make sense of the trauma and themselves again through adaptation and rebuilding solid world views ([Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, & Solomon, 2010](#)). During this process, how the individual decides to make meaning of the situation and view the trauma and/or changes they have made is critical in whether or not PTG occurs.

However, since the inception of PTG, there has been some backlash in terms of questions and concerns regarding PTG's positive psychological slant and possible biases because the construct only refers to positive changes resulting from trauma. Thus, researchers have broadened

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the scope and attempted to concurrently assess negative and positive changes (Dekel, Ein-Dor, & Solomon, 2012). Through this approach, researchers better understand that PTG is not the opposite of PTSD; rather, trauma symptomatology and PTG can occur concurrently or show an inverted U-shaped relationship (Shakespeare-Finch & Lurie-Beck, 2014). This further complicates the understanding of the differences between positive and negative outcomes after trauma. Yet, assessing PTG and negative outcomes concurrently does not eliminate all concerns, as negative outcomes do not necessarily encompass the opposite of growth.

To address these issues, other researchers started assessing the opposite of growth by looking for declines in the same broad areas of PTG allowing for responses of increase (positive changes) or decline (negative changes) within the same domains (Arpawong, Richeimer, Weinstein, Elghamrawy, & Milam, 2013). To this end, a recent study conducted with earthquake survivors in New Zealand measured positive and negative changes in the areas of life philosophy, empathy, and personal strength (Marshall, Frazier, Frankfurt, & Kuijer, 2015). This update allowed for a broader picture of survivors' posttraumatic experiences, as they could now report either increases or declines within the same construct. However, it is possible that people learned about their strengths as well as their weaknesses while experiencing their psychological struggle. Posttraumatic recognitions encompass a variety of psychological changes that can incur both improvements and decrements within the same domain, which could still result in an aggregate increase in personal growth.

In order to allow for simultaneous reports of positive and negative changes, Baker, Kelly, Calhoun, Cann, and Tedeschi (2008) developed a way to assess posttraumatic depreciation (PTD) that allows for the measurement of growth and depreciation simultaneously. The option of independently reporting positive and negative changes within the same content domain provides a more comprehensive picture of overall transformations among individuals who have experienced trauma. Studies that have implemented both PTD and PTG have revealed the independent, mutually exclusive nature of these two constructs (Cann et al., 2010). Moreover, studies have revealed no systematic correlations between the PTG and PTD scales, the Posttraumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996) and the Posttraumatic Depreciation Inventory (PTDI; Baker et al., 2008) respectively (Cann et al., 2010; Kunz, Joseph, Geyh, & Peter, 2017). However, there is additional evidence suggesting commonalities between PTG and PTD, whereby the centrality of a traumatic event was predictive of both PTD and PTG (Allbaugh, Wright, & Folger, 2016), linking growth and depreciation through the same precursors. Another study showed that PTG only correlated positively with better overall adjustment when PTD was also present (Kunz et al., 2017), suggesting a need for both growth and depreciation for overall adjustment after trauma. Although recognizing one's own strengths and weaknesses are, for example, linguistically distinct, these two concepts likely share a common core; both involve self-realization that encompasses the same conceptual space.

To address the similarities and distinctions across PTG and PTD, we focused on two factors in the current study: nationality and gender. With regard to nationality, PTG has been studied worldwide (Weiss & Berger, 2010). Previous research has shown sociocultural differences in PTG such as Americans reporting higher levels of PTG over most other countries such as Japan (Taku, 2013). This higher reporting may be due to PTG having been developed in a Western framework, Americans having a higher propensity towards seeking out positives in negative situations, and highly valuing self-enhancement (Zoellner, Rabe, Karl, & Maercker, 2008). However, PTD has thus far only been investigated in Western cultures. Studies have observed that PTD is significantly associated with negative outcomes, such as depression and anxiety, in American (Allbaugh et al., 2016) and Australian (Barrington & Shakespeare-Finch, 2013) samples. Little research has been conducted to assess PTD in Eastern cultures.

For PTG, Taku (2011) identified gaps between operational

definitions of PTG and how individuals define PTG across Japanese and American samples. These differences are due in part to individualist and collectivist identities that differentially pervade US and Japanese society respectively, leaving room for differing interpretations of psychological changes defined in both constructs. Additional studies have revealed cross-national differences in PTG levels (Taku, 2013), owing perhaps to different perceptions regarding positive versus negative changes rather than discrepancies in self-enhancement tendencies or social pressure to report positive outcomes (Zoellner et al., 2008).

Gender is another factor that could influence the conceptualization of positive and negative changes resulting from trauma. A meta-analysis revealed that women tend to report higher levels of growth than men (Vishnevsky, Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, & Demakis, 2010). The meta-analysis also revealed that age moderated the effect of gender and PTG, showing that women reported higher levels of PTG as age increased. These gender differences may be attributed to a difference in perceptions of PTG or value systems, as some areas are typically considered to be more stereotypically feminine (e.g., relating to others) and may be a goal-driven behavioral outcome for more females than males.

However, gender differences in PTG levels are not consistent across nations. Taku (2013) suggested there may be differences whereby positive changes are more indicative of psychological growth. For example, masculinity is likely to foster perceptions of positivity regarding certain types of growth, such as knowing that one can better handle difficulties, and femininity is likely to influence other types of changes, such as having more compassion for others. Therefore, PTD items such as *I am less certain that I can handle difficulties* may be more strongly associated with negative changes for men, and *I have less compassion for others* may be more strongly associated with negative changes for women. Thus far, no studies have shown gender differences for the development of PTD (Baker et al., 2008; Marshall et al., 2015).

In the context of Japanese culture, which emphasizes collectivistic characteristics, what constitutes positive or negative changes post-trauma may be distinct from those observed in Western cultures. Furthermore, variable gender role expectations in terms of masculinity and femininity may lead to variable interpretations regarding trauma-induced psychological changes. Given the lack of research assessing the combined nature of such culture and gender effects, the present study was exploratory in nature. Thus, the present study aimed to assess agreement between operationally defined PTG-PTD and perceptions of positive-negative changes as a function of culture and gender.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and participants

A cross-sectional study using anonymous self-report questionnaires was conducted. Undergraduate students were recruited from two private universities in metropolitan areas of Japan. We chose this group to minimize the limitation of generalizability. The ratio of males to females in this group was roughly 1:1. Students ($N = 261$) completed a pencil-and-paper survey; data from four participants were excluded due to incomplete and unreliable responses.

2.2. Procedure

We explained the purpose of the study to students who were eligible to participate. Students were instructed to respond to the questionnaire only if they provided informed consent. Participants completed the survey on their own and returned the questionnaire packet directly to the researcher. No incentives were provided for participation. The institutional review board approved the study protocol.

2.3. Measures

In addition to assessing gender, age, and whether participants were

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