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Growing in times of grief: Attachment modulates bereaved adults' posttraumatic growth after losing a family member to cancer

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ABSTRACT

This study explored whether attachment moderated the relationship between grief and posttraumatic growth. A total of 240 Chinese adults who have lost a family member to cancer reported on their grief (Prolonged Grief Questionnaire-13; PG-13), posttraumatic growth (Posttraumatic Growth Inventory; PTGI) and attachment (Experiences in Close Relationships; ECR). The results suggested that bereaved individuals who scored high on attachment anxiety showed a substantial and positive relationship between grief and posttraumatic growth, while their less anxiously attached counterparts showed no such association. Attachment avoidance was not significantly related to the association between grief and posttraumatic growth. Findings indicated that individuals high in attachment anxiety have the potential to benefit and gain from the process of adapting to the loss. The implications of the results for relevant research and grief counseling were discussed.

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1. Introduction

Grief is a normal response to the loss of a loved person (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001; Thomas et al., 2014). In some cases, individuals develop a grief related disorder, such as Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder (PCBD; DSM-5, American Psychiatric Association, 2013), or Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD ICD-11, Maercker et al., 2013). However, most individuals recover from the loss after a certain period of time and continue their life with the integration of the loss (Bonanno and Kaltman, 2001; Bonanno et al., 2002). Posttraumatic growth is not infrequent among individuals who have lost a beloved person (Engelkemeyer and Marwit, 2008; Gerrish et al., 2009; Joleen et al., 2012). Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) define posttraumatic growth as positive psychological changes resulting from experiencing and processing of highly stressful and traumatic events or life crises, typically leading to an enhanced appreciation for life, sense of personal strength, greater spirituality and improved and deeper personal relationships. The specific role of grief in the development of posttraumatic growth, however, is a matter of debate. For instance, Büchi et al. (2009) investigated grief and posttraumatic growth among couples who lost their premature babies and found a

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significant positive correlation between grief and posttraumatic growth, which confirms other findings (Wagner et al., 2007; Shakespeare-Finch and Armstrong, 2010). In contrast, Engelkemeyer and Marwit (2008) found grief to be independent of posttraumatic growth, which is also supported by other research (Stroebe et al., 2008; Currier et al., 2013). Finally, Hogan and Schmidt (2002) reported a negative association between grief and posttraumatic growth.

One important reason for the inconsistency among the findings about the association between grief and posttraumatic growth might due to the methodological limitations or differences. For example, most of the prior studies were cross-sectional designs (e.g. Büchi et al., 2009; Engelkemeyer and Marwit, 2008; Currier et al., 2013). Moreover, participants in some studies were those who lost a specific group of family members (e.g. Büchi et al., 2009; Engelkemeyer and Marwit, 2008), while in other studies participants were the general bereaved people (e.g. Currier et al., 2013; Shakespeare-Finch and Armstrong, 2010). However, it should be noted that the controversy of results could also be explained by moderators that have been ignored in previous studies. Gerrish et al. (2009) proposed the importance to identify the particular characteristics of those bereaved persons who are likely to experience posttraumatic growth and brought the individual difference variables into attention. Indeed, a number of theorists suggested that attachment insecurities may act as risk factors in the grieving process (Shear and Shair, 2005; Stroebe et al., 2005, 2010). Yet, this possibility received little attention in empirical

studies. The aim of the current study is to fill this gap by examining attachment insecurities as moderators of the extent to which grief goes along with posttraumatic growth.

Adult attachment theory emphasizes two primary dimensions – anxious attachment and avoidant attachment (Mikulincer et al., 2002, 2003; Meredith et al., 2006). Avoidant attachment involves a positive view of the self and negative beliefs about others. Individuals who score high on this dimension tend to mistrust others' motives and good will, and attempt to maintain emotional distance in their relationships, presumably to protect themselves from being hurt. They show an excessive need for self-reliance, and are reluctant to disclose their feelings and concerns to others (Wei et al., 2007). Anxious attachment, in contrast, reflects a negative view of the self and a positive view of others. Individuals who score high on anxious attachment tend to be dependent of their relationships, but constantly worry that others will not be available or abandon them in situations of need. Presumably to deal with their anxious apprehension, they tend to excessively seek approval from others, and feel distressed when their partners are unavailable or unresponsive (Wei et al., 2007). From a theoretical point of view, attachment anxiety reflects an over-activation of the attachment system (Sonkin, 2005), whereas attachment avoidance involves a deactivation of attachment needs resulting in the minimization of emotional pain (Vrtička and Vuilleumier, 2012).

Essentially representing an interpersonal emotion regulation framework, the attachment system has been discussed to play a critical role in the grieving process (Shear and Shair, 2005; Stroebe et al., 2005; Fraley and Bonanno, 2004; Wayment and Vierthaler, 2002; Ho et al., 2013; Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2007; Mancini et al., 2009). Stroebe and Schut (1999) proposed the dual process model (DPM) of grief work. According to the DPM, two ways of coping with grief can be identified in bereaved individuals. One is loss-oriented coping and refers to a focus on dealing with a particular aspect of the loss itself (such as ruminating about the deceased). The other is restore-oriented coping and refers to activities to deal with negative outcomes caused by the loss (such as engaging in activities that are aimed at coping with bereavement-related loss, e.g. establishing new supportive relationships, mastering the tasks that the deceased had undertaken and the development of a new identity). They suggested that the bereaved person's oscillation between loss- and restore-oriented behaviors is modulated by the attachment style (Stroebe et al., 2005), such that high levels of attachment anxiety and avoidance undermine the normal process of recovery characterized by the oscillatory process. For example, individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety may be lack of trust in the self and bend to be emotional and preoccupied after a loss, while individuals with high levels of attachment avoidance may be lack of trust in others and have a tendency to suppress and avoid emotion expression after the death of beloved (Stroebe et al., 2005). Although this proposition has not been tested empirically, evidence supports an association between high levels of grief with anxious attachment (Fraley and Bonanno, 2004; Wayment and Vierthaler, 2002; Ho et al., 2013) and with avoidant attachment (Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2007; Mancini et al., 2009).

Researchers have also investigated the relationship between attachment and posttraumatic growth. For example, Salo et al. (2005) studied 275 former political prisoners and reported that individuals high on avoidant attachment scored lower on posttraumatic growth. Similarly, Turunen et al. (2014) found that among the survivors of life-threatening trauma, those with higher levels of attachment avoidance scored lower in posttraumatic growth. Attachment avoidance also directly predicted poor post-bereavement functioning in violent loss survivors (Meier et al., 2013). Interestingly, however, attachment anxiety was found to be

positively associated with posttraumatic growth (Dekel, 2007), and this association was confirmed in a study by Spielman and Taubman-Ben-Ari (2009). Dekel et al. (2011) investigated 103 former Israeli prisoners of the Yom Kippur War, and found that attachment anxiety went along with belief in a just world and self-control which might explain positive outcomes of attachment anxiety. This details with Eastwick and Finkel (2008) view that attachment anxiety activates the attachment system and motivate individuals to re-establish contact with an attachment figure. Note that this claim does not extend to attachment avoidance. Thus, different attachment dimension may play different roles regarding the interpersonal regulation of grief, and consequently, regarding growth among individuals suffering from trauma. We therefore expected that avoidant attachment is negatively correlated with posttraumatic growth, whereas anxious attachment is positively correlated with posttraumatic growth.

Taken together, the literature suggests that attachment acts as a moderator in the relationship between grief and posttraumatic-growth. Individuals with an avoidant attachment style avoid facing the reality of the loss and the experience of grief. This prevents them from growing during the grief experience. We therefore expect that their grief is not associated with posttraumatic growth, or even with particularly low posttraumatic growth. Individuals with low levels of attachment avoidance, however, may more readily face and deal with their grief and therefore show more growth in association with grief.

Individuals with low levels of attachment anxiety typically feature schemas marked by trust in the availability of their attachment figures, and therefore the death of a loved one is hurtful, but not necessarily threatening their self (Wei et al., 2007). With their grief being less traumatic, there may be limited opportunity to grow from their grief, and we would therefore not expect a strong correlation between grief and posttraumatic growth among these individuals. In contrast, individuals with marked attachment anxiety may experience their loss as deeply disturbing and traumatic, and this may urge them to actively deal with the unbearable situation, seeking help (Eastwick and Finkel, 2008) or maintaining a continued bond with the deceased (Ho et al., 2013). Thus, the more pain and distress they feel, the more they engage in actions to overcome their pain, thus leading to more posttraumatic growth. We therefore expect a positive correlation between grief and posttraumatic growth among individuals with higher levels attachment anxiety.

1.1. The current study

The main goal of the current study was to examine whether anxious and avoidant attachment moderated the association between grief and posttraumatic growth. We hypothesized that (1) avoidant attachment correlated with more grief; but (2) with less posttraumatic growth. Furthermore, we expected that (3) anxious attachment is correlated with more grief and more posttraumatic growth, and that (4) avoidant and anxious attachment moderated the association between grief and posttraumatic growth. We tested these predictions in a sample of bereaved Chinese adults who suffered the loss of a family member to cancer. In China, approximately 1.96 million individuals die of cancer every year (Chen et al., 2014), leaving behind a large population of bereaved family members. However, for these bereaved people, there is a lack of studies and services concerning their grief. Therefore, the current study will be helpful to give a better understanding of the relations between grief, PTG and attachment, and also to offer implication of grief work among these Chinese bereaved people whose family members died of cancer.

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