

What counts as positive growth following trauma? The conceptual difficulties of spiritual/religious change

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Abstract

Jayawickreme and Blackie refer frequently to ‘positive’ personality change following trauma, but avoid discussing ambiguities regarding what the word positive means in different domains, for example the area of spiritual/religious belief. Three of the most widely used post-traumatic growth measures specify that increased belief in God following trauma is indicative of positive change, and decreased theistic belief reflects negative change. Here I question this value judgement, propose conceptual clarification on what kinds of changes reflect growth, and suggest various criteria for evaluating post-traumatic change (or indeed any personality change) as positive.

The methodological and conceptual challenges of researching post-traumatic growth (PTG) are complex, as expertly outlined in Jayawickreme and Blackie's (2014) review in this issue. There are however deeper conceptual difficulties which they omit to mention, particularly in relation to the domain of spirituality and religiosity. This commentary focuses on that issue, and uncovers problematic assumptions within existing measures and models.

Post-traumatic growth emerged as a domain of empirical research in the 1990s, based initially on interview-led studies designed to ascertain what kinds of transformative changes occur following disaster events. In order to decide which changes were negative, and which were positive, the studies relied on participants' subjective appraisals of the matter. The *Perceived Benefits Scale* (PBS) was developed in this way, based on interviews with American survivors of a tornado and a mass killing (McMillen, & Fisher, 1997), while the *Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory* (PTGI) was developed based on interviews with American individuals who had experienced spousal loss, physical disability and other life crises (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996; 2004). The *Stress-Related Growth Scale* was also developed at the same time (Park, Cohen & Murch, 1996).

These instruments contain subscales and items pertaining to religious change, all of which state that following trauma an *increase* in religious belief is indicative of growth, and that a lowering in belief is indicative of decline. For example, an item in the *Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory* is "I have a stronger religious faith" – this must be agreed with to be scored as growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). In the *Perceived Benefit Scales* (McMillen & Fisher, 1998) items that are indicative of growth include "Because of this event, I am more religious", "Because of this event, I am more spiritual" and "Because of this event, I have a greater faith in God." In the *Stress-Related Growth Scale* (Park, Cohen & Murch, 1996) items include "I developed/increased my faith in God", "I developed/increased my trust in God", and the rather theologically ambiguous "I understand better how God allows things to happen". If one is to gain high marks for growth on this item, one must endorse all these statements.

This means that when assessed by the PTGI, the SRGS or the PBS, only people who become *more* religious following trauma qualify as showing growth on these items.

Conversely, a person who following trauma becomes *less* religious will be scored as experiencing post-traumatic *decline*, even if they personally see their move away from religion as positive.

The origins of these items stem back to the original interview studies from which the models and measures emerged. The studies were done in the USA, a country that is more religious than any other Western country¹, and it may well be that all participants, or the vast majority, experienced an increase in faith following the trauma, and subjectively reported this was a positive change. That would have been a rationale for inclusion of these items in the resulting measures, which are likely to have been validated on other US samples. However applying this instruments to Europe or more secular samples is problematic. It is telling that the one PTG questionnaire developed with a UK sample does not include a religion or spirituality subscale. The *Changes in Outlook* questionnaire was based on open-ended questions given to British survivors of a shipping disaster (Joseph et al., 1993; Yule, Hodgkinson, Joseph, Parkes & Williams, 1990). This questionnaire does not mention spirituality or religion, either because the British participants in their interview study were less religious, or because the authors made the decision to word items in a way which enabled a greater variety of shifts in belief to be indicative of growth.

In addition to the bias against changes away from spirituality/religion contained within the aforementioned PTG measures and models, another problem in these measures is that there is no discernment about what *kind* of increases in religious belief and activity should count as growth. The problem is illustrated by the fact that research on individuals who convert to fundamentalist sects has found that trauma is often involved in the conversion process (Hood & Hill, 2009). According to the items in the PGTI, SRBS or PBS, this counts as an increase in religious belief, so we should accept post-traumatic conversion to fundamentalism as positive growth.

The fallibility of this position is self-evident, and it is clear that more discrimination is necessary about what counts as positive development following trauma. There are

¹ 53 percent of Americans say that religion is very important in their lives, compared with 16 percent, 14 percent, and 13 percent, respectively, of the British, French and Germans, according to the World Values Survey (Swanbrow, 2007)

developmental models that are more discriminatory about what counts as religious or spiritual growth (see Robinson, 2012); for example, Fowler's (1981) model of religious change talks of growth being manifest in a change away from literal dogmatic faith towards a reflective, tolerant and experiential faith. Measuring pre-post changes using this model would be a step forward, but it still is only valid for those who hold a religious worldview, not for those who opt out of religion and faith more generally, and find personal growth in non-belief.

This problem will be partly solved by moving away from those existing retrospective assessment measures that contained religiously loaded items, but still challenges will remain in deciding what change is positive growth, in matters of belief and elsewhere. Thus in addition to the methodological improvements suggested by Jayawickreme and Blackie, researchers should be more explicit about *how* they are judging positive growth, and what *criterion* they are basing this judgement on. Such criteria can include: increased wellbeing, higher cognitive complexity/ability, greater evolutionary adaptedness, or moral/ethical enhancement (Robinson, 2012). By making underlying assumptions and growth criteria explicit, then there is less change of hidden bias within measures or in theoretical interpretation of change data.

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