

Post-Traumatic Growth and Resilience among University Students in Baghdad: A Conceptual Study

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Article Info

Article history:

Received Jun 11, 2013

Revised Aug 21, 2013

Accepted Sep 7, 2013

Keyword:

Posttraumatic Growth

Resilience

University students

ABSTRACT

Posttraumatic Growth (PTG) refers to positive changes in human life elicited by exposures to traumatic events, such as war and terror. The fact that Iraqi university students continue their studies not long after a bomb explosion or deaths of significant others related to the War in 2003 indicated that they possess certain degree of resilience. This study conceptualized the causal relationship between the resilience and the level of PTG among Iraqi university students after being exposed to traumatic events in the form of the War in 2003. Thorough discussion on the previous studies have been done, recommendations on the sampling methods, as well as the instruments, were made. Significance of the empirical research related to this conceptualized relationship is discussed at the end of this paper.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Due to its suffering from several wars over two decades, Iraqi society has become ground for many researches related to exposure to traumatic events. However, most of the researches tend to focus on the negative individual transformations as posttraumatic events effects. While studies in different settings related to terrorism incidents [1]-[3], wars [4]-[6], natural disasters [7]-[9] and sexual assault [10], [11] discovered that PTG is evident; it is not impossible that similar phenomenon might occur in Iraqi settings related to the War in 2003.

Accordingly, within the past three decades, researchers in a several fields have published many psychological studies documenting and exploring large array of negative outcomes that may result from trauma through the exposure of individuals to crises and traumatic events [12]-[14]. Recently, positive outcomes that result from trauma has been started to be studied. Although the concept of growth after stressful events may be counterintuitive, spiritual habits and philosophers have approved the transformative impact of trauma for thousands of years [15].

Posttraumatic growth (PTG) is defined as positive changes after being exposed to extreme crisis, such as wars, natural disasters, cancer, community or sectarian violence, terrorist attacks, traffic accidents, and sexual assault [16], [17]. It was evident that as much as 50-60% of survivors reported positive changes after being exposed to traumatic events [16], [18]. PTG exhibits positive relationship between exposure to traumatic events and positive personal transformations [10], [19]-[23].

While exposures on traumatic events daily life might have positive or negative responses, a mechanism is required to help individuals to adapt and maintain adequate esteem and self-efficacy in order to be able to experience positive transformation. One of the factors that could alter the occurrence of PTG in any cases was resilience, in spite of controversial theoretical assumptions about its relation with PTG have been made [15], [24], [25].

The main objective of this current study is to conceptualize the interrelationship between the levels of PTG and resilience among university students in Baghdad who are exposed to traumatic events related to the war in 2003. Therefore, relevant literatures such as findings of the previous studies were reviewed and compiled in order to investigate domains and elements of each variable.

Apart from filling the gap or literature in this field, knowledge obtained from this research has important implications for both preventive interventions of psychological trauma. It will offer a platform for the future researches in establishing the way to foster resilience in order to increase the occurrence of PTG among individuals who have exposed to prolonged traumatic events such as in Iraq. Furthermore, it is believed that this current study might open multiple fields for researchers in Iraq for in-depth study of these studied variables, especially for further redevelopment of the nation of Iraq.

2. POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH

The term PTG refers to the reported subjective experience of positive psychological change, such as increased appreciation of life, setting of new life priorities, a sense of increased personal strength, identification of new possibilities, improved closeness of intimate relationships, or positive spiritual change, as a result of the struggle with trauma, which then also has an opportunity for further individual development of significant positive change arising from the struggle with a major life crisis [7], [26]-[29].

In 1996, Tedeschi and Calhoun formulated that the PTG reported by the survivors of traumatic events covered five domains of their lives; (1) their relationship with others, (2) perception of themselves, (3) outlook of life, (4) spiritual beliefs, and (5) appreciation of life [27]. In addition, a growing body of literature indicated the involvement of some variables in triggering PTG, such as optimism [18], positive reinterpretation [30], age [31], gender [18] and acceptance coping [32].

Confirming the aforementioned statements, other studies indicated that PTG were related to many other themes such as experience of meaningful engagement, and appreciation of life [33], and negative post trauma effects [21]. The existence of the mentioned themes were evident in several reports over many kinds of traumatic events studies, such as wars [4]-[6], terrorism incidents [1]-[3], sexual assault [10], [11] and natural disasters [7]-[9].

Related to the presented literature, PTG can be defined as a positive changes achieved by individuals after suffering traumatic events which revealed their abilities that not be known of them previously and that pay for progress in achieving its goals and aspirations in the future.

3. RESILIENCE

Anthony (1974) and Windle (1999) defined resilience as successful coping resulting from one's own efforts, strength, initiative, and endurance in the face of social disadvantage or highly adverse conditions [34], [35]. Based on the human functionality, resilience was defined as the capacity to maintain competent functioning in the face of major life stressors [36]. Further definition of resilience was advocated by Ramsey & Blieszner (1999) as ability to respond with resilience to the pressures of everyday life as well as to cope with traumatic occurrences [37]. Resilience is further defined as the ability of adults in normal circumstances who are exposed to an isolated and potentially highly disruptive event to maintain relatively stable, healthy levels of psychological and physical functioning [38], [39].

Often be confused with PTG, resiliency differs from PTG in two important ways. First, a facet of resiliency is that a person maintains their initial level of functioning after the trauma has ended. In contrast, the core definition of PTG is that an individual exceeds their level of pre-trauma functioning in at least one area. Second, when an individual is resilient they are able to weather adversity without significant levels of distress, while experiencing distress is central to the occurrence of PTG. Distress and the crumbling of a person's core assumptions are necessary in order for a person to build new and stronger foundations [7].

Related to individual transformation, such as PTG, it is confirmed that there is a need to define any factors that help individuals to develop adequate self-esteem and self-efficacy to gain PTG [40]. Answering the need, it was discovered that resilience is a complex and multidimensional, which involves an interactive process between risk and protective factors [41], [42]. In 1993, Wolin and Wolin defined resilience as personality traits that characterize the following features of people: (1) foresight, (2) independence, (3) creativity, (4) sense of humor, (5) relationship with others, and (6) spiritual or oriented values [43]. Additionally, one's spiritual belief is often cited as important protective factors and components of the development of resilience [44]-[46].

Connor and Davidson, in 2003 conducted an exploratory factor analysis study upon resilience where five factors emerged reflecting: a) personal competence, b) tolerance of negative affect and stress-related growth, c) acceptance of changes, d) personal control, and e) spiritual orientation to the future [47]. Their

research led to the development of Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC-25), which has been used by many studies to assess the levels of resilience for individuals [6], [48], [49].

The aforementioned literature led resilience to be the predictor variable in this current study. Contextually, resilience is defined as the ability to recover from this adversity and stress and continue to live effectively and efficiently. Therefore, a conceptual framework can be drawn as illustrated in Figure 1.

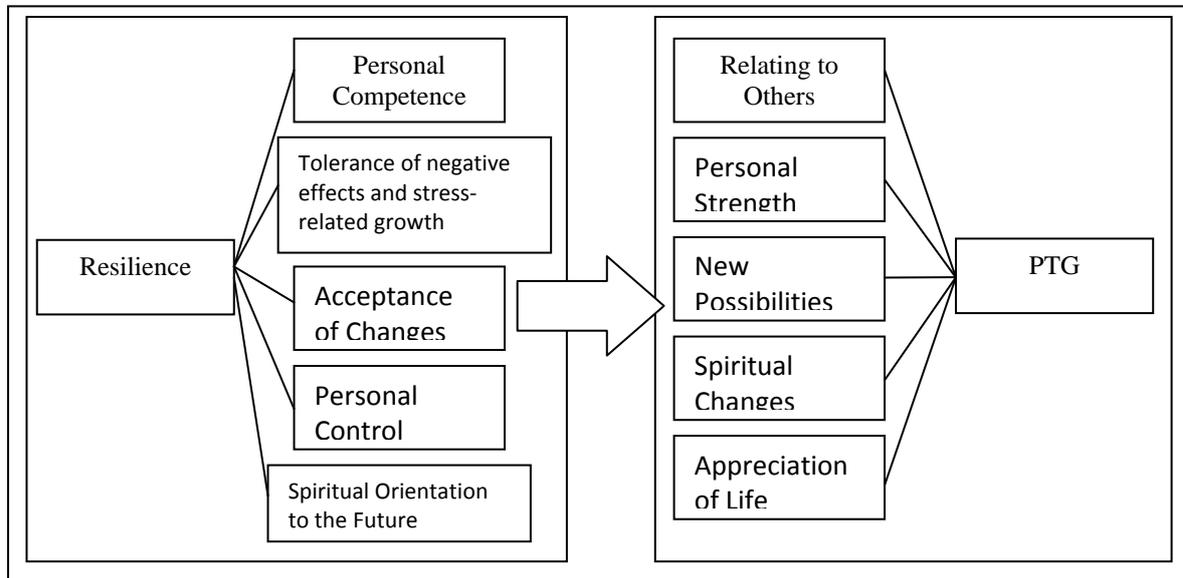


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

As illustrated in Figure 1, each main variable (Resilience and PTG) consists of five different factors. While previous studies formulated the existence of the factors, most of them were done in different settings, such as different locations, different sample characteristics, and different traumatic events. Thereby, in the context of Iraqi university students and the latest war in Iraq, the existence of each factor should be studied.

4. CONCLUSION

The interrelationship between variables and their factors were conceptualized in this conceptual study based on the previous studies related to resilience and PTG. However, it is recommended that the future researchers should consider the following points. Samples of such studies should be taken exclusively from Iraqi university students, who were exposed to traumatic events related to the war. Therefore, instrument such as Baghdad Trauma History Screen (BTHS) should be utilized to screen the samples with exposure to traumatic events.

While CD-RISC-25 can be utilized to measure resilience, Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory should be used to assess the positive growth reported by the individuals who were exposed to the traumatic events [27]. The mentioned PTG Inventory, which has been used in collectivistic cultures [50]. In order to get a better result, each item should be translated into Arabic language and presented in bilingual manner.

Significance of the empirical research following this current conceptual study can be considered high. As a recovering nation, Iraqi society needs the best supports of its members in order to return to its glorious moments. Prolonged traumatic events, such as wars, dictatorship, revolutions, civil riots, and others seemed to make it more difficult for individuals within the Iraqi society to preserve their motivations and positive attitudes towards the development and re-development of the nations. While PTG is reported to be evident in many other settings, it is not impossible that PTG occurs within Iraqi society; and it is important to impose, maintain, and utilize it to develop the nation. Therefore, any study related to PTG is very significant for the country of Iraq for the time being.

Apart from filling the gap or literature in this field, knowledge obtained from this research has important implications for both preventive interventions of psychological trauma. It will offer a platform for the future researches in establishing the way to foster resilience in order to increase the occurrence of PTG among individuals who have exposed to prolonged traumatic events such as in Iraq.

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