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HOPE AND THE AFFECTIVE TONE OF NARRATIVES AS CORRELATES OF POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH IN PEOPLE WHO HAVE LOST MOTOR ABILITY

In the article we present data collected from 50 people who lost their motor ability in accidents. Analyses of narrative interviews conducted with the accident victims suggest that a positive affective tone of narratives about the accident itself and the accident's influence on later life is connected to higher levels of posttraumatic growth. Other factors facilitating the experience of posttraumatic growth were hope and basic trust, as well as the theme of agency present in the narratives.

Keywords: narratives, hope, posttraumatic growth.

INTRODUCTION

Narratives are one of the basic forms of communicating and structuring knowledge about the world (Bruner, 1991; Trzebiński, 2002). They facilitate the

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arrangement and integration of events from one's own life or from other people's lives into coherent strings of events (McAdams, 1993, 2013). The narrative structuring of experience plays a significant role after major life events or challenges that require a change in the way people think (McAdams, 2013; Neimeyer, 2006; Sommer, Baumeister, & Stillman, 2012).

Narratives are defined as cognitive representations that are based on information selected from a multitude of possibly available data. Metaphorically, people "read" reality in their specific, individual ways. Narratives about specific events and chapters in life constructed by people can be analyzed in terms of their individual characteristics, such as affective tone, sequences of emotional changes (contamination or redemption), or the presence of communion or agency themes (McAdams, 1993, 2013).

Individual affective tone develops in early childhood (McAdams, 1993). In the first two years of life a child who experiences care and whose basic needs are satisfied, especially in terms of safety, develops the virtue of hope (Erikson, 1964). The emerging hope is expressed in the belief that the world is friendly and that it makes sense (Trzebiński & Zięba, 2004). According to McAdams (1993), the attitudes and beliefs about the world, trust, and sense of security shaped during childhood, though initially not verbalized and not conscious, influence the narrative form of recounting experience during the entire life. Life narratives constructed by people who developed hope are characteristic in terms of their positive affectivity. Regarding current events, the positive affective tone of a narrative is expressed in the expectation of a positive outcome of the ongoing event. In the case of past events, it is expressed in searching for positive outcomes even of the most difficult and negative experiences. The affective tone of a narrative is connected to satisfaction with life and psychological well-being (McAdams et al., 2001).

Agency and communion are the two main dimensions of human existence (Bakan, 1966), and according to McAdams (1985) these two themes are manifested in all narratives pertaining to individual experience. Agency is connected to striving for individuation and separation through the attainment of one's own goals, achievements, domination, and self-mastery, whereas communion is connected to a search for unity with others by caring for them and developing deep relationships as well as to cooperation, focus on others, intimacy, and affiliation.

Studies on posttraumatic growth conducted since the mid-1990s focus on long-term developmental changes in personality that result from adapting to life events of a specific type, sometimes referred to as seismic events. These are traumatic events, where life or health is threatened, or important episodes in life

that undermine the current ways of thinking about oneself and the world. Accidents resulting in a permanent loss of motor ability (e.g., in losing the ability to walk or move around freely without a wheelchair or assistance) belong to this category of events. Numerous studies have shown that the process of dealing with a traumatic event can lead to individual growth in terms of empowerment, deepening relationships with others, and spiritual development (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006; Linley & Joseph, 2004).

Hope and optimism are two individual characteristics that facilitate post-traumatic growth (Tennen & Affleck, 1998), similarly to basic trust (Trzebiński & Zięba, 2013; Zięba, Czarnecka-van Luijken, & Wawrzyniak, 2010). Pals and McAdams (2004) and Pals (2006) present data suggesting that the experience of posttraumatic growth is facilitated by a tendency to construct such narratives where the endings of stories and their consequences have a positive affective tone. Other studies indicate that the themes of agency and communion present in narratives are also related to a tendency to assume specific attitudes in life (McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield, & Day, 1996). A strong presence of the theme of agency in narratives about important life events is usually connected to the level of motivation for action and achievement. In the coping process, this may help a person to see the difficult event as a chance to increase individual strength, one of the main areas of posttraumatic growth. The theme of communion is characteristic in people with a strong need for intimate relationships and so it may be connected to another area of posttraumatic growth – deepening the relationships with others.

The aim of the study was to test the hypothesis that the positive affective tone of narratives and the presence of agency and communion themes in those narratives is positively correlated with the level of posttraumatic growth.

METHOD

The participants in the study were accident survivors who suffered a loss of motor ability (could no longer walk or move around freely without a wheelchair or assistance). They participated in physical therapy in STOCER hospital in Konstancin-Jeziorna. We collected data from 50 people (10 women and 40 men) aged 20 to 71 ($M = 35.75$, $SD = 13.78$). All the participants had had accidents within six months before the study took place ($M = 84.30$ months, $SD = 79.79$). A psychologist employed by the hospital invited the patients to join the study and informed them about its aim, procedures, and anonymous character as well as

about the benefits to be expected for participation and the right to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

The study was conducted individually. The participants were asked to describe their accident and to recount what had happened in their lives since then. The person conducting the interviews had been trained to conduct them in accordance with the narrative approach, where the interviewer listens to the story told by the participant. The narratives were recorded after a written consent was obtained from the participants. The participants filled out a short answer sheet about basic demographics and a number of questionnaires:

- KNS (the Polish version of Adult Dispositional Hope Scale), measuring hope – that is, the convictions about one's own agency and belief in having skills to find solutions (eight diagnostic items, 8-point scale),

- BHI-12 (Basic Hope Inventory-12), measuring basic trust – the beliefs that the world is benevolent and makes sense (nine diagnostic items, 5-point scale),

- SZŻ (*Skala Zmian Życiowych*, Life Changes Scale) measuring posttraumatic growth. The questionnaire consists of 16 items (5-point scale, from *substantially decreased* to *substantially increased*), where respondents answer questions pertaining to their beliefs about themselves and the world in the context of their traumatic experience.

The questionnaires have acceptable reliability and validity (Łaguna, Trzebiński, & Zięba, 2006; Trzebiński & Zięba, 2003; Zięba, Wawrzyniak, & Świrkuła, 2010).

We transcribed the interviews before analyzing them. We used a simplified system of transcription, where elements such as breaks, changes in intonation, suspended statements, raising one's voice, or increased pace of speaking are recorded. The analysis was done independently by three competent judges: two psychologists with experience in interpreting narratives and a linguist. The judges had access only to the transcription and had no additional information about the participants (except a general description of the group), nor did they know the questionnaire scores. The judges coded the characteristics of the narratives: affective tone and the salience of agency and communion themes.

Affective Tone

The affective tone of the narratives was evaluated based on the instructions provided by McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, and Bowman (2001), where the points on a 5-point scale indicate: 1 – a definitely negative ending, a very unhappy story; 2 – a negative ending, a generally unhappy story; 3 – a vague or neutral

ending, a story neither happy nor unhappy; 4 – a positive ending, a generally happy story; 5 – a definitely positive ending, a very happy story.

The Theme of Agency

To code how strongly the theme of agency was present in the narrative, we used McAdams's system published on the website of the *Foley Center for the Study of Lives*. In this method, the person analyzing the interview looks for specific contents of the narrative that pertain to the dimension of agency:

- Self-Mastery – the protagonist of the narrative attains important goals, gains insight into his/her own identity, and shapes it according to his/her individual values;

- Status/Victory – the protagonist succeeds in competing with other people, his/her needs for respect from others are met;

- Achievement/Responsibility – the protagonist achieves great success in completing tasks or fulfilling important duties and deals with serious challenges;

- Empowerment – the protagonist feels his/her strength and purpose through interactions with something strong, important, and significant (God, nature, mentor).

The strongest possible presence of the theme of agency (4 points) is noted when the narrative contains elements from all four categories.

The Theme of Communion

Coding for this theme is identical to the theme of agency. The construct of communion consists of the following thematic categories:

- Love/Friendship – the protagonist of the narrative experiences love for or friendship with another person;

- Dialogue – the narrative pertains to a situation where the protagonist holds a conversation with a person or group that he/she has an important relationship with;

- Caring/Help – the protagonist of the narrative supports and helps another person or wants to take care of someone;

- Unity/Togetherness – the protagonist feels unity with a group, community or humankind, for example through participating in a family event or an important community meeting.

RESULTS

First, we analyzed those indices that were identified when we coded the participants' narratives and we related them to a quantitative scale. We also analyzed the questionnaire data.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of the Variables Measured in the Study

	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>
Affective tone	45	0.07	0.76	1.00	4.50
Theme of agency	48	1.39	1.15	0.00	4.00
Theme of communion	48	0.44	0.64	0.00	3.00
Basic trust (BHI-12)	50	30.78	5.36	17.00	45.00
Hope (KNS)	50	51.72	8.85	29.00	64.00
Posttraumatic growth (SZŻ)	50	62.04	9.55	43.00	88.00
Time since the accident (months)	50	84.30	79.80	6.00	346.00

We conducted correlation analyses to verify the relationships between the narrative indices (affective tone, themes of agency and communion), beliefs (basic trust and hope), and posttraumatic growth. The communion dimension did not meet normal distribution criteria, so for pairs including this variable we computed Spearman's r_{ho} . In all other cases we computed Pearson's r correlations. The results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2
Correlations Between Posttraumatic Growth, Affective Tone, Salience of Agency and Communion Themes in Narratives, Basic Trust, Hope, and Time Since the Accident

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Posttraumatic growth	–					
2. Affective tone	.43**	–				
3. Theme of agency	.46**	.54***	–			
4. Theme of communion	.14	.31*	.28	–		
5. Basic trust	.29*	.24	.33*	.22	–	
6. Hope	.44***	.30*	.14	-.16	.14	–
7. Time since the accident	.17	.19	.23	.08	.18	.01

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

In our sample, posttraumatic growth correlated positively with the affective tone of the narrative, with the salience of the agency theme in the narratives, with basic trust, and with hope.

DISCUSSION

In our sample, posttraumatic growth was positively related to basic trust and hope, which is consistent with the data from previous studies (Gum & Snyder, 2002; Trzebiński & Zięba, 2013).

As expected, posttraumatic growth was correlated with positive affective tone of the narratives about the accident and its consequences for those who suffered a loss in motor ability. Notably, due to the way we operationalized the construct of positive affective tone, those narratives that were characterized by a stronger positive affective tone could also be interpreted as stories about unpleasant events which ended well or whose consequences were good – for example, events resulting in increased introspection or meaning in life. Posttraumatic growth can be described as an outcome of the process of reconstructing experience, which is what the narrative about the experience and its consequences amounts to. The narrative takes the form of “a story that ended happily,” where happy ending does not necessarily mean an increase in well-being or the conditions of life but may as well mean a deeper sense of meaning in life (Pals & McAdams, 2004).

A higher level of posttraumatic growth was declared by those participants whose narratives included a stronger theme of agency. Contrary to our expectations, we did not detect such a relationship with the theme of communion. When interpreting those results, it is necessary to note that the theme of communion was quite weak and we observed it rarely in the narratives. We wondered where this difference in the presence of those two themes came from, especially as it is rarely observed in similar studies. Possibly, the unique circumstances (loss of motor ability) experienced by our participants increased the importance of the agency dimension in terms of needs and motivation – that is, of being able to solve problems, cope with everyday life challenges, be independent, and prove one’s worth. Perhaps limited physical motor ability makes people more likely to assume the role of recipients of help and support rather than experience the need to care for and help others – that is, to experience communion. The context of our study, namely the fact that it was conducted in a hospital, might also have increased the presence of the agency theme in the narratives. It seems that during

physical therapy the cognitive availability of the notion of agency, efficacy, and overcoming difficulties and limitations may increase. Nevertheless, the positive relationship between agency and posttraumatic growth seems to indicate that an active, problem-oriented attitude towards one's new life circumstances may facilitate posttraumatic growth among those who experienced a loss of motor ability after an accident. This conclusion is partially supported by another finding, namely that hope was a stronger predictor of posttraumatic growth than basic trust. In most studies in this area, but with groups with different characteristics, basic trust was a stronger predictor of posttraumatic growth compared to hope and sometimes it was even the only significant predictor (Trzebiński & Zięba, 2004, 2013). It is therefore possible that agency-oriented attitudes play a positive role in the process of posttraumatic adaptation among people who have suffered a motor ability loss in accidents.

A significant limitation to our method was the way we analyzed the gathered data, which included a subjective assessment of the participants' narratives conducted by competent judges. This method is liable to error even when proper standards are met, that is, even if the judges conduct their assessments independently in the first stage of the analyses, are unaware of the participants' questionnaire data, and are properly instructed and trained.

Another important limitation lies in the correlational design of the study. The results can be interpreted only as covariance of the studied variables. We do not know whether the positive affective tone of the narratives about the accident and its consequences, stressing agency in the narratives, led to or resulted from posttraumatic growth.

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