Writing about Betrayal Trauma: Examining Gender and Narrative Structure

Carolyn B. Allard
Jennifer J. Freyd

Introduction

Pennebaker's Writing Paradigm

- Experimental design in which participants are instructed to write either about emotional events or neutral topics
- Those writing about emotional events typically display physical and psychological health improvements (Pennebaker, 1996; 2001)
- Presence of emotion words, and causal and insight words (presumably reflective of coherence) related to positive outcomes (e.g., Pennebaker & Francis, 1996; Pennebaker, 1998)

Betrayal Trauma

- Trauma high in betrayal is perpetrated by someone who is close to the victim and/or upon whom the victim is dependent (see Freud, 1996, 2001)
- Associated with impaired memory for trauma, presumably for purpose of preserving victim-perpetrator relationship, and various negative sequelae, including dissociation, depression, anxiety and physical ailments (e.g., Freud, Klest & Alland, in press)

Objectives

- Primary goal: to test generalizability of emotional writing to betrayal trauma
- Up until now, paradigm has mostly been applied to emotional events
- Those few applied to trauma involve one-time non-complex low betrayal traumas
- Secondary goal: to investigate mechanism behind writing phenomenology by elucidating essay characteristics associated with positive outcomes
- While number of emotion words has been associated with positive outcomes, the relationship with causal and insight words is less clear (e.g., Pennebaker & Francis 1996)
- Global ratings of coherence may be more valid

Method

Participants

65 (51 female, 14 male) physically symptomatic undergraduates recruited from psychology Human Subjects Pool and compensated with choice of partial course credit or $7

Demographics (representative of UK undergraduate population):

- Age: M = 19.49 years (SD = 3.86) and mostly (94.4%) single
- Ethnicity: 67 (93.1%) Caucasian; 2 (2.8%) each Asian, African American, Hispanic, Pacific Islander; and 1 (1.4%) American Indian

Assessments

- Trauma assessed at pretest using Brief Betrayal Trauma Survey (Freyd & Goldberg, 2004)
- Psychological health assessed at pretest and posttest with Trauma Symptom Checklist 40 (TSC 40; Elliott & Briere, 1992)
- Includes overall symptom score and 6 subscales (depression, dissociation, anxiety, sleep difficulties, sexual, posttraumatic stress)
- Time-bound so that participants were instructed to report frequency of symptoms during past 2 weeks

Procedures

- Random assignment to intervention of 2 x 20-minute writing assignments one week apart
- Group 1: most distressing interpersonal childhood experience
- Group 2: how you spent your time yesterday (n = 32)
- Random assignment to intervention of 2 x 20-minute writing assignments one week apart
- Time-bound so that participants were instructed to report frequency of symptoms during past 2 weeks

Content Analysis of Essays

- Counted number of emotion and coherence related words using Pennebaker's Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) computer program (Pennebaker, Francis & Booth, 2001; see Table 1 in handout for examples of words counted)
- Rated coherence using Global Ratings of Essays About Trauma (GREAT) code (Klest & Freud, 2004; see Table 2 in handout for coding rubric)

Discussion

The large number of participants reporting high betrayal trauma is not surprising given that they were highly physically symptomatic. Many chronic pain disorders and health problems have been found to be related to trauma (e.g., Felitti, 2002). That women reported experiencing more high betrayal trauma replicates previous findings (Freyd & Goldberg, 2004).

The different types of traumas reported by the women and men of this study, and the differential results of the writing intervention for each gender, suggest it would be fruitful to consider the type of trauma experienced by an individual when selecting writing strategies.

The writing process to include components found to be related to better outcomes may enhance the effectiveness of the writing intervention. It appears that positive outcomes are related to the frequency of emotion words used. While causality and insight words appear not to be related to outcome, increased coherence, as measured via global ratings, appears to be related to better outcomes. No interpretations can be made, but the lack of significant correlations between emotion, causality, and coherence ratings in the neutral essays, and between baseline symptom measures and coherence ratings, suggest the change in coherence has predictive value.

Future research should be aimed at overcoming some of the limitations of this study, including improving the sample homogeneity, increasing the follow-up latency, and experimentally manipulating the content and structure of the writing.

References


Summary of Results

- Over 50% of all participants reported having experienced at least one betrayal trauma
- Women reported more betrayal trauma than men (see handout for specific distribution)
- Significant correlations exist between symptoms and betrayal trauma

Intervention Results

- No significant overall main writing or gender effect on symptomatology outcome
- A significant gender by writing condition interaction emerged: that women in trauma writing condition benefited more and men benefited more in the neutral condition (see Figure 1)

Content Analysis Results*

- LIWC emotion words:
  - Increased frequency of positive emotion words over the 2 writing periods, and greater use of anxiety or fear words in either essay, predicted improvements in symptomatology
- LIWC causal and insight words:
  - Neither change in word frequency or overall word usage predicted symptomatology at posttest

*See Table 3 in handout for the summary of significant effects, which included emotion scores, gender, change in LIWC word count or GREAT coherence rating from essay 1 to essay 2, and the maximum word count or rating from either essay, as predictors of posttest symptom scores.