Exploring the Potential of Pennebaker’s Writing Paradigm on Betrayal Trauma Sequelae

Introduction

Pennebaker’s Writing Paradigm

- Experimental design in which participants are instructed either to write about emotional events or neutral topics
- Those assigned to emotional writing condition typically display physical and psychological health improvements as compared to those in neutral condition (Pennebaker, 1997; Smyth, 1998)
- Narrative coherence and presence of emotion words may be important for positive outcomes (e.g., Pennebaker, 1993; Pennebaker, 1997)

Betrayal Trauma Theory (Pennebaker, 1996, 2001)

- Distinguishes traumas on the basis of two event dimensions which may elicit different reactions: life-threat (e.g., major car accident; violent rape by a stranger) and social betrayal (e.g., abuse by a close other)
- Trauma high in betrayal is perpetrated by someone who is close to the victim and/or upon whom the victim is dependent
- 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., Penneke, Kest, & Allard, 2004)

Rationale

- Up until now, paradigm has mostly been applied to emotional but not necessarily traumatic events
- Those few studies involving traumatic writing have only included one-time non-complex trauma low in betrayal
- Primary objective: to test generalizability of emotional writing to betrayal trauma
- Secondary goal: to investigate mechanism behind writing phenomenon by elucidating essay characteristics associated with positive outcomes

Method

Participants

- 65 (51 female, 14 male) physically symptomatic undergraduates recruited from psychology department Human Subjects Pool, and compensated with choice of partial course credit or $7
- Demographics (representative of UO undergraduate population): Age: M = 19.94 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 (Goldberg & Freyd, under review)
- Inventory of Limbic Languidness (PILL; Pennebaker 1982)
- Psychological health assessed at pre and posttest with time-bound* version of Trauma Symptom Checklist 40 (TSC; Elliott & Briere, 1992)
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Procedures

- Random assignment to intervention of 2 x 20-minute writing assignments one week apart
- Group 1: most distressing interpersonal childhood experience (n = 33)
- Group 2: how you spent your time yesterday (n = 32)
- Completed posttest one month following second writing session

Content Analysis of Essays

- Counted number of emotion and coherence related words using Pennebaker’s Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count computer program (Pennebaker, Francis & Booth, 2001) - see Table 1 in handout for examples
- Word counts used as predictor variables in regression analyses predicting physical and psychological symptoms scores at posttest

Discussion

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

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 considering intervention strategies for trauma.

Directing the writing process to include those components found to be related to better outcomes may enhance the effectiveness of a writing intervention. For example, it appears that positive outcomes are related to the use of emotional words, at least for women. Coherence, on the other hand, as measured through causation and insight words in this study, appears to have little bearing on writing outcome. However, it is debatable whether counting these words is sufficient in judging essay coherence.

Research is currently underway to attempt to assess coherence in a more meaningful way, and to replicate these findings in a larger and more heterogeneous population of community adults participating in a similar intervention study with a longer followup interval.