

Deliberate Rumination and Positive Reappraisal as Serial Mediators Between Life Impact and Posttraumatic Growth in Victims of State Terrorism in Chile (1973-1990)

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Abstract

This study examines the role of coping strategies related to positive reappraisal versus other cognitive strategies (deliberate rumination) as mediators between life impact and posttraumatic growth in survivors of the military dictatorship in Chile between 1973 and 1990 (tortured political prisoners and family members of political prisoners executed and missing). Survey data from 251 political violence survivors were analyzed using the SPSS PROCESS macro for bootstrapping indirect effects (Hayes, 2013). Results indicated that positive reappraisal (or reframing) coping mediated the relationship between life impact and posttraumatic growth. A serial multiple mediation model indicates that in the life impact to growth moderation process, rumination must be followed by positive reappraisal to drive this growth. These findings suggest that positive reappraisal of the traumatic experience is essential to achieve growth reports. Implications of these

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more complex relations are discussed for both counseling interventions and further research.

Keywords

memory and trauma, mental health and violence, spirituality and violence, violence exposure

The effects of State terrorism carried out systematically by the civil-military dictatorship that governed Chile between 1973 and 1990 continue to be evident 40 years after the coup d'état. The consequences of the violence are evident among the survivors of this violence and in the social relations as a whole, affecting the entire community. The groups formerly in conflict still maintain high levels of prejudice and distrust toward each other. The low legitimacy of economic model and low institutional trust, by the population, have also been shown on various occasions (Cárdenas, Páez, Rimé, & Arnosó, 2015; Cárdenas, Páez, Rimé, Bilbao, & Asún, 2014). This disapproval levels are rooted in a political constitution inherited from the dictatorship. The violence affected thousands of people, almost all of them dissidents of the military regime and former supporters of the Popular Unity government headed by Salvador Allende. The numbers indicate that nearly 40,000 people suffered political imprisonment and/or torture, 3,197 were assassinated, and 1,193 are still missing (Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura, 2004; Comisión Nacional de Verdad y Reconciliación, 1991).

Studies on the dictatorship's impact on the survivors and the social fabric has focused, comprehensibly, on the negative or adverse effects. An extensive body of literature shows the lasting effects of political violence on those who experience it (Bendfeldt-Zachrisson, 1988; Browne, 2003; Lira, 1996; Rojas, Barceló, & Reszczyński, 1991; Shaw, 2003; Wainryb & Posada, 2007), as well as its serious influence on the relations between groups, the perception of a negative social climate, and the deterioration in institutional trust (Cárdenas, Arnosó, & Páez, 2015; Lira, 1991). Thus, attention has been systematically directed toward changes related to the trauma (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006).

However, the literature suggests that the negative impact of violence is not irreversible, and that the beliefs system that was damaged by the traumatic experience can, in the medium and long term, be re-established through "reappraisal" experiences (Arnosó et al., 2011; Pérez-Sales, 2007). These experiences refer, for example, to situations in which a survivor feels strengthened and capable of controlling and managing the difficulties in his or her

life. Every time the survivors of violence can laugh and openly enjoy some aspects of their daily lives, worry about or take care of another human being, or find words to express what they lived through, there is a feeling of progress and victory over the impact of the trauma (Berliner, Nikkelsen, Bovbjerg, & Wiking, 2004). At other times, the “reappraisal” can refer to specific experiences or actions, such as committing themselves to individual or community reparation actions, participating in support groups, seeking reference groups with a high sense of ethics or a strong component of commitment, providing their testimony, and/or presenting public or political denouncements of the damage (Páez, 2010; Rimé, Kanyangara, Yzerbyt, & Páez, 2011).

Studies have found that, beyond this reconstruction, it is possible for growth experiences to take place in people who have had to deal with the consequences of violence. Although there is little evidence about reports of growth in survivors of political violence and State terrorism, some studies describe the presence of growth effects among Palestinian ex-political prisoners (Salo, Quota, & Punamäki, 2005); an increase in psychological insight, social affiliation, and spirituality (Quota, Punamäki, & El Sarraj, 1997); reports of growth in holocaust survivors (Lev-Wiesel & Amir, 2006), survivors of terrorism experiences not performed by the State (Hobfoll et al., 2007; Vázquez, Pérez-Sales, & Hervas, 2008), war veterans (Rosner & Powell, 2006, Tedeschi, 2011), refugees (Ai, Tice, Whitsett, Ishisaka, & Chim, 2007; Kroo & Nagy, 2011; Powell, Rosner, Butollo, Tedeschi, & Calhoun, 2003), and survivors of politically motivated violence (Dauber Konvisser, 2013, Simms, 2015), among others.

The concept of posttraumatic growth includes all the positive psychological changes experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances (Joseph & Linley, 2008; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). The basic premise is that the traumatic event manages to shatter or destroy the core beliefs people have about themselves, about other people, or about the world (Janoff-Bulman, 2004, 2006), and that the attempt to systematically revise and reframe this experience is a basic factor that would allow the emergence of growth experiences (Taku et al., 2007; Triplett, Tedeschi, Cann, Calhoun, & Reeve, 2012). Thus, although the memory is accompanied by emotions of pain and persistent clinical symptomatology, at the same time, people often describe how their coping strategies (individual or collective) have allowed them to experience growth in certain areas of their lives, reconstruct meaning in life, and productively resume their social relations and daily activities (Linley & Joseph, 2011). We know that in the medium and long term, the majority of people tend to reconstruct what occurred in a positive way and emphasize the positive aspects, drawing on the benefits that these experiences had for them in their relations with others and in their

vision of the world. Moreover, people who have maintained “intact” memories that are not reconstructed, or who do not emphasize the potential positive aspects of their experience when recalling and narrating what happened, tend to have more psychopathological symptoms and disorders (Fairbank, Hansen, & Fitterling, 1991).

In the present article, our objective is to examine the reports of growth in a sample of people affected by State terrorism in Chile in the period between 1973 and 1990. In addition, we will analyze the mediator effect of some coping strategies, particularly those related to the positive reassessment of the experience and deliberate rumination about the traumatic events. We expect that, in accordance with other findings (Cann, Lawrence, Tedeschi, & Solomon, 2010; Triplett et al., 2012), the cognitive strategies associated with the deliberate review of the traumatic experience will be relevant, but we think the positive reappraisal of the events will be a significant mediator between the rating of the life impact caused by the violence and the growth levels. Deliberate rumination involves a more reflective effort focused on dealing with the situation, and is a form of processing that is characterized by a repetitive focus on the processing aimed that includes active engagement in finding and meaning making (Stockton, Hunt, & Joseph, 2011). Although we expect that contemplating the experience will result in reports of growth, we think this review must lead to a more optimistic view of the impacts of the event on the biography of the individuals. Thus, reports of growth will be the result of deliberate rumination involving a positive reappraisal of the events and their consequences. It consists of a construction of narratives about the traumatic experience that, without altering the facts, allows people to reframe the experience and derive new meaning from it.

Our hypothesis states the following:

Hypothesis 1: Life impact is positively related to reports of posttraumatic growth but mediated sequentially and significantly by deliberate rumination and coping strategies involving the positive reappraisal of the experience.

Life impact concerns the psychological and social effects of the violence on lives and beliefs about the world of survivors. The construction of the new, more optimistic narration of the past makes it possible to recreate or produce the meaning expressed in the growth reports. This reappraisal requires people to review their experience systematically and in a controlled way, but they can also elaborate it and reassess it from a more optimistic point of view, connecting it to the present and providing a new story about themselves.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The non-probabilistic sample was composed of 251 people, 105 men (41.3%) and 146 women (57.5%), who were victims of the State terrorism that took place in Chile from 1973 to 1990, and whose ages ranged from 20 to 98 years ($M = 60.85$ years and $SD = 13.40$ years). Three people omitted the data about the interviewee's sex. Regarding the socioeconomic level, 20.8% of the interviewees had a low level, 60% had a medium level, and 19.2% had a high level (the variable referring to the socioeconomic level is a composite of the data about the educational level and the type of work the person does). The data were collected between July and December 2014 in the cities of Santiago, Valparaíso, and Antofagasta. The following violent events were mentioned most by the participants: imprisoned for political reasons (44.5%), having undergone torture (24.1%), or being a direct family member of an executed politician (37.4%) or of a missing prisoner (57.7%). Among the participants, 63.9% gave their testimony in one of the truth commissions held in Chile.

The snowball-type sampling was used. Participants were contacted in each city (the sample was recruited only in urban areas). To do so, the key informants were popular individuals who belonged to human rights organizations and relatives of victims groups in each city (i.e., with many network connections). The instrument was applied by specially trained personnel. Once participants had agreed to participate in the study and signed a consent letter informing them of its goals and guaranteeing confidentiality and anonymity (ethical criteria were those of the National Commission of Science and Technology), they completed the paper-and-pencil questionnaire individually.

Instrument

The instrument included a first block of sociodemographic questions (sex, age, type of violence suffered, educational level, type of job, among others) and a second block with the measures and scales.

Abbreviated Posttraumatic Growth Scale (Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, Taku, Vishnevsky, Triplett, & Danhauer, 2010). The version adapted and validated in Chile was used (Cárdenas, Arnosó, & Páez, 2015). It is composed of 10 items with a Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 6 (*completely agree*). Higher scores indicate greater reports of growth. The reliability coefficient for this application was .86 (item-total correlations between .47 and .70).

Abbreviated Coping Styles Scale COPE-28. The scale (Carver, 1997) consists of 28 items with response options from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 6 (*completely agree*). It measures coping styles, but in this article, we used the data from the items referring to positive reappraisal strategies (active attempts to change one's point of view about the stressful situation, with the intention of seeing it from a positive perspective). The reliability coefficient for the application was .85 (item-total correlations between .39 and .65). We asked participants about the strategies used immediately after the violence.

Event-Related Rumination Inventory. This scale (Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, Triplett, Vishnevsky, & Lindstrom, 2011) includes 10 items with a Likert-type response format ranging from 1 (*completely disagree*) to 6 (*completely agree*) to assess deliberate thinking about the traumatic event. The deliberate rumination items gauge whether, during the months immediately after the event, survivors had intentionally reflected on and thought about the event. The scale was translated and validated for use with a Chilean sample (Cárdenas, Barrientos, Ricci & Páez, 2015). The reliability coefficient for this application was .88 (item-total correlations between .47 and .72).

Life impact of stressful events. This is a single item designed to quantify the impact the experience had on their lives and their beliefs. The item is presented in a graduated response format ranging from 1 (*very little impact*) to 6 (*very great impact*).

Analytical Strategy

We used partial correlation analysis (controlling for sex and socioeconomic level) and the SPSS PROCESS macro for bootstrapping indirect effects, which provides indirect effect estimates for serial multiple mediators (Model 6), standard errors (*SEs*), and confidence intervals (*CI*s) derived from the bootstrap distribution with 10,000 bootstrap estimates. Bootstrapped *CI*s are superior to the standard forms of estimating *SEs* of indirect effects (Hayes, 2013). An indirect effect is significant if the *CI* does not include the 0 value. The life impact of exposure to the traumatic event was a predictor variable, deliberate rumination and positive reappraisal were used as serial mediators, and posttraumatic growth was an outcome in the model. The analyses were conducted controlling for gender and socioeconomic level.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Posttraumatic Growth and Partial Correlations Among PTG, LI, DR, and PR (Controlling the Variables Sex and Socioeconomic Status).

Factor	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Partial Correlations		
			LI	DR	PR
PTG	4.69	1.04	.42**	.40**	.54**
LI	5.32	1.15		.32**	.21*
DR	4.13	1.27			.42**
PR	4.59	1.37			

Note. PTG = posttraumatic growth; LI = life impact; DR = deliberate rumination; PR = positive reappraisal.

**Correlations significant at $p < .001$.

Results

Life Impact and Posttraumatic Growth

As Table 1 shows, the participants express an important impact of the violent event on their lives ($M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.15$). In the same way, the total scores on the short scale of Posttraumatic Growth ($M = 4.69$, $SD = 1.04$) indicate that they experienced growth, as 82.4% of the participants obtain scores above 4 (item ratings on the 6-point scale). The growth measure correlates significantly with life impact ($r = .33$, $p < .001$).

Mediators of Posttraumatic Growth

Moderate and significant correlations were detected between the proposed mediators and posttraumatic growth (Table 1). Thus, the coping strategies involving positive reappraisal, $r(246) = .54$, $p < .001$, and deliberate rumination, $r(245) = .40$, $p < .001$, are consistently related to the growth measure. In addition, the life impact of the violence correlates with deliberate rumination, $r(241) = .32$, $p < .001$, and positive reappraisal, $r(241) = .21$, $p = .020$.

As Figure 1 shows, the total effect of life impact on posttraumatic growth was significant and positive. These effects were reduced when deliberate rumination and positive reappraisal were included in the model as mediators, confirming the hypothesis about the indirect effects of life impact through the deliberate rumination and coping strategies, $R^2 = .337$, $F(3, 223) = 44.94$, $p < .001$. The bootstrap analysis (Table 2) yielded a significant indirect effect of life impact on posttraumatic growth through the serial mediators ($B = 0.056$, $SE = 0.029$, 95% CI = [0.004, 0.123]). Thus, reports of growth are related to

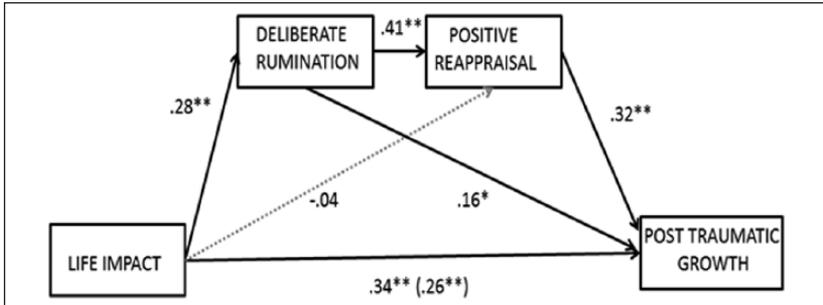


Figure 1. The effect of the life impact of violence on posttraumatic growth as mediated by deliberate rumination and positive reappraisal.

Note. Path coefficients are unstandardized estimates. Total and direct (in parenthesis) effects of life impact on PTG.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .001$.

the life impact produced by State violence, and this effect is more pronounced when people systematically review their experience and carry out positive reappraisal processes of their traumatic experiences.

As Figure 1 shows, the relationship between deliberate rumination and posttraumatic growth is significant, but less than the effect achieved through the series of mediators, suggesting that positive reappraisal has the greatest impact when it follows rumination. Likewise, we can see that the mediator role of positive reappraisal is clear, as it is not directly related to life impact, but rather sequentially through deliberate rumination.

Discussion

One of the most lasting effects of the Chilean military dictatorship was the fear it produced in social relationships. The indiscriminate violence had the objective of harming the social fabric, instilling fear in people and in social relations (Lira, 1991). Thus, anyone could be a potential victim of violence, and those who were not could be the object of distrust and suspicion. The extreme traumatization (Becker & Castillo, 1990) disrupted the life paths of the survivors of the violence, producing irreparable losses in their lives and limiting them as political subjects. However, the results of this study show that the survivors of the repression were also able to grow, in spite of these experiences (independent of their membership in a particular social socio-economic level or gender).

Table 2. Regression Coefficients, Standard Error, and Model Summary Information for the Presumed Mediating Influence of the Serial Multiple Mediator Model.

Antecedent	Consequence											
	M1 (Rumination)			M2 (Reappraisal)			M3 (PTG)					
	Coefficient	SE	P	Coefficient	SE	p	Coefficient	SE	p			
Life impact	.28	.076	<.001	-.04	.078	=.627	.26	.054	<.001			
Rumination	—	—	—	.49	.066	<.001	.16	.051	=.002			
Positive reappraisal	—	—	—	—	—	—	.32	.046	<.001			
Constant	2.64	.418	<.001	2.73	.453	<.001	1.17	.337	<.001			
	$R^2 = .056, F(1, 225) = 13.39, p < .001$			$R^2 = .205, F(2, 224) = 28.95, p < .001$			$R^2 = .377, F(3, 223) = 44.94, p < .001$					

Posttraumatic growth differs from the traditional concept of resilience. Resilience involves a recovery of prior exposure to violence state, whereas growth involves the discovery of strengths that might not have been present before exposure to violence. Thus, violence can have a paradoxical effect, as it aims to harm others while opening the door to the discovery of unknown strengths in survivors.

Although rumination has traditionally been associated with symptoms of depression or posttraumatic stress (Nolen-Hoeksema, McBride, & Larson, 1997), the results of this study confirm that, when rumination is voluntary and deliberate, it can mediate in posttraumatic growth processes to the extent that it allows the person to activate a process of reflection or assessment of the information and extract positive lessons from it (Cann, Lawrence, Tedeschi, & Solomon, 2010; Martin & Tesser, 1996; Watkins, 2008). The exploration of the negative aspects of the trauma is a necessary element in the reconstruction of the interrupted system of meaning (Cann et al., 2010; Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998), as it requires the person to process information and integrates it into a new coherent model of the self (Foa & Kozak, 1986; Triplett et al., 2012). The struggle to make sense of the experience can bring great life satisfaction and an increase in meaning in life (Park, 2010). Thus, many people forced to cope with trauma can make sense of their suffering, reassess some aspects of it in a more positive way, and thus, experience posttraumatic growth.

In summary, the results support the idea that trying to obtain something good from bad experiences can promote posttraumatic growth. This “optimistic” point of view is important because it indicates that the process through which growth occurs involves not only the systematic revision, cognitive review, or deliberate rumination about the experience, but this reappraisal must also be reoriented so that the people affected by the violence can make sense of it. This process, in which the memory of positive events is usually emphasized (solidarity with victims, resistance to the dictator, communal coping, etc.), is associated with a greater search for meaning and has a more stable long-term impact.

For all of these reasons, the results of this study allow us to state that it is important to create new narratives that can focus on aspects of the traumatic experience that can be reinterpreted in a positive way. A new narrative has to be constructed that, using the same events, allows the reconstruction of the damaged self and makes it possible to once again join and trust in others. It consists of elaborating stories that connect our history with who we are now, giving meaning to the trajectories of the survivors of violence.

The results presented show the possibilities of positive psychology. They look not only at the damage that bad situations can produce but also the

growth when there are processes of revision and positive reappraisal. These results are relevant for designing psychotherapeutic guidelines and strategies for survivors of political violence, as they orient the construction of new significance and meanings attached to traumatic experiences, even many years after their occurrence. We know that constructed meaning is always co-constructed, contextual, and socio-historic, and it is articulated with previous meanings sifted over time through the social life (Feierstein, 2012). Therefore, we can propose that a real elaboration will only be possible, among the survivors of political violence and their families, when there is a social recognition of the political violence events, and when those who suffered the traumatic experiences are recognized and allowed to assume the condition of citizens and positive, creative, and productive political subjects in their society. Various research studies discuss the relationship between dispositional optimism and posttraumatic growth (Bostock, Sheikh, & Barton, 2009; Büyükaşık-Colak, Gündoğdu-Aktürk, & Bozo, 2012), specifically in relation to health traumas. Other studies have systematically related hope, optimism, and openness to reports of growth (Ho et al., 2011; Knaevelsrud, Liedl, & Maercker, 2010). The relevance of this study lies in showing how these variables can be used to reappraise the past to improve the way the present is experienced.

To understand the meaning the trauma has in their lives and how it has modified their priorities and their way of relating to others, it is important to join the storylines that can give continuity to the experiences of people whose lives were shattered by the situation of violence. We recognize ourselves in the past and project ourselves into the future through a new more optimistic account of who we have been.

Although it offers some intriguing findings and suggests some areas for further inquiry, this study has some limitations. One important limitation of this study has to do with the amount of time that has passed since the events occurred. In some cases, 40 years had already gone by, and so it is possible that some effects were due to the time elapsed or to a series of factors that are impossible to control. In the same way, many of these people have lived through a cumulative series of traumatic events. Thus, there may be people in our sample who have suffered violence in many ways and at many different moments. We have to recognize that this study focuses on specific traumatic events rather than possible cumulative effects of trauma over longer periods.

What we find relevant is the way the elaboration work is fundamental in fostering changes. This is an affective process that points not only to the systematic review of the experience but also to a cognitive effort to understand the events, giving them personal meaning, “unwrapping” or “revealing” the

damage, but above all reassessing and framing the experience from a more optimistic perspective. This work consists of finding out how certain current aspects of the self, valued by the subject, have their origin or development in these painful experiences. It is a case of recognizing oneself in the new narrative as a relevant actor in the construction of a life full of purpose, in the words of De Gaulejac (1987), becoming, through the narration, a subject in one's own story and the producer of new stories.

We think this paper contributes to confirming that the growth process experienced by survivors of State terrorism in Chile is the fruit of a difficult task of revising the experience that shattered their lives, and their struggle to preserve the memory and against forgetting. This revision work, when systematic, leads to a process of positive reassessment of the traumatic experience and to the creation of new narratives about themselves, the people around them, and the world. In addition, this study reminds us of the enormous impact that institutionalized violence has had on the survivors, which many of them continue to suffer. For this reason, this study has a corollary that could be summarized as the need to continue to accompany the victims and work with them to try to view the past in a more optimistic light.

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