

CHAPTER 1

The Posttraumatic Growth Model

Sociocultural Considerations

Lawrence G. Calhoun, Arnie Cann, and Richard G. Tedeschi



The term *posttraumatic growth* (PTG) first appeared in print in 1995 (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995) and it has been defined as the experience of positive change resulting from the struggle with major life crises (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). Although PTG, and related terms such as stress-related growth (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), adversarial growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004), construed or perceived benefits (McMillen, Zuravin, & Rideout, 1995; Tennen, Affleck, Urrows, Higgins, & Mendola, 1992), and thriving (O'Leary & Ickovics, 1995), are relative newcomers, the idea of growth as a potential consequence of grappling with trauma¹ is ancient (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995).

The assumption that facing and struggling with major difficulties in life can lead to positive changes, sometimes radical transformations, is part of ancient myth, literature, and religion. Influential clinicians and scholars of the twentieth century also suggested this idea (Caplan, 1964; Frankl, 1963; Yalom 1980). This assumption, then, is not something that was recently discovered. However, the systematic quantitative investigation of PTG is recent, made possible by the development of scales specifically designed to measure growth (Joseph, Williams, & Yule, 1993; McMillen & Fisher, 1998; Park et al., 1996; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). These scales were first developed in Western, English-speaking countries, but now their translations and the investigation of PTG using them are found in many countries around the world; this very book provides a strong indication of how much work has now been done. Subsequent chapters examine PTG in a variety of different geographic and cultural contexts, and in this chapter our focus is somewhat theoretical and specific to

¹ As we have stated elsewhere (for example, Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004), we use the terms *trauma*, *crisis*, *major stressor*, and related terms as essentially synonymous expressions to describe circumstances that significantly challenge or invalidate important components of the individual's assumptive world.

the model of PTG that we have been developing over the years (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998, 2004, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004) and that we build upon in this chapter. We begin by briefly examining the concept and meaning of the word *culture* and we then suggest some elements of culture that may be particularly useful for looking at PTG in cultural contexts. We also provide a very brief look at our model of PTG, and then, using key components of our model, we offer some suggestions about how cultural factors may affect the possibility of PTG.

CULTURE AND PTG

The word *culture* and its variants are widely used in current social and behavioral sciences. It is often left undefined, but used as an explanatory concept for differences in attitudes, thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. There is no single definition of culture that is universally accepted, but the one proposed by Fiske (2002) seems to represent a good, current way of thinking about culture (Stuart, 2004). *Culture* is a “socially constructed constellation consisting of such things as practices, competencies, ideas, schemas, symbols, values, norms, institutions, goals, constitutive rules, artifacts, and modifications of the physical environment” (Fiske, 2002, p. 85). We assume that “culture is transmitted through . . . environmental influences” (Stuart, 2004, p. 3), with interactions with other people playing a major role (Brown, 2004).

The current accepted wisdom in North America, quite reasonably, is that culture has a significant impact on individuals; with rare exceptions, however, (Matsumoto, 2007) the processes whereby this broader and more general *culture* has an impact on individuals, couples, or families, are left unspecified. We suggest some factors and processes whereby cultural elements influence the behavior of individuals, particularly in the aftermath of traumatic events, both in present and close as well as in more abstract and removed ways. Several general frameworks have been suggested (Barker, 1965; Bronfenbrenner, 1977) and a variety of different terms have been used to describe the possible impact of broad sociocultural elements on the individual. We use two words to differentiate between levels of cultural influence: *proximate* and *distal*. Proximate influences come from real people with whom the individual interacts and distal cultural influences are either geographically removed or transmitted through impersonal media (for example, movies, books, television programs, or podcasts).

SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXT AND PTG: PROXIMATE INFLUENCES

Individuals are influenced by their subcultures and by proximate influences, and an important one of these are the individual’s *primary references groups* (Stuart, 2004; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). These are groups of people, either formally or informally organized, to which individuals belong and with whom they interact, for example, close friends, families, teams, gangs, and religious groups. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to specify in detail the processes whereby small groups control and influence their members.

However, it seems reasonable to assume that positive or negative social responses (for example, reward and punishment) by the members of the groups, to what an individual says or does, will exert significant influence on that individual.

One major aspect of social responses to persons facing major stressors is the *idioms of trauma, distress, coping, and growth*. For example, phrases we have heard in some groups of Protestants in the Southeastern United States (these are anecdotal reports, not systematic surveys) are: “*There are no coincidences; Everything happens for a reason; God has his reasons.*” And we have also heard people say, “*God never gives you more than you can handle.*” These phrases imply that God has a master plan, and that events, even traumatic ones, are part of a great unfolding design. On the other hand, we have also heard individuals, not part of the Southern Protestant tradition, tell us, “*Random shit happens,*” indicating that they assume that their misfortune is part of living in a world in which events can be uncontrollable and can have purposeless consequences. Such different ways of speaking about and conceptualizing the crisis event and its aftermath may well be expected to have consequences for how others respond to the individual in crisis, influencing how well the individual copes and also influencing the degree to which PTG is experienced.

Additional proximate sociocultural influences are the social *norms and rules* (Argyle, Furnham, & Graham, 1981) of the primary reference groups, especially those also endorsed by the individual. Following the customs and rules of the group would be expected to meet with social approval and their violation would be expected to meet with disapproval and perhaps elicit specific sanctions from group members (Garfinkel, 1967). In the context of facing major life crises, the primary reference groups’ rules regarding expected coping behavior, views about what helps, and, the desirability of emotional disclosure in general and in relation to growth in particular, would be expected to affect individuals’ responses to trauma.

SOCIOCULTURAL INFLUENCES AND PTG: DISTAL INFLUENCES

There are some intriguingly broad, societal narratives and views that may be relevant to the process of PTG. For example, one such broad narrative, identified as influential in the United States, is the “American experiment narrative” (Smith, 2003, p. 67). It is characterized by a sense of destiny, whereby the United States is called a “shining city on a hill . . . to guide a dark world into a future of prosperity and liberty” (Smith, 2003, pp. 67–68). Another general theme that appears to be present in the broader “American” (that is, U.S.) story, at least for highly generative persons, is what McAdams has called “redemptive life stories” (McAdams, 2006, p. 12). The primary element in this narrative is “ . . . Bad things happen to me, but good outcomes often follow. My suffering is usually redeemed . . . ” (McAdams, 2006, p. 10). Individuals living within the sphere of influence of broad, pervasive narratives are likely to be influenced by them (Smith, 2003). Such narratives may be particularly relevant to persons facing the difficult circumstances of major life stressors.

To understand the impact of broad cultural views and narratives such as individualism or collectivism on individuals, it is necessary to compare large aggregates of people for example, Japanese versus North Americans (Fiske, 2002; Morling & Lamoreaux, 2008).

At this point in the study of growth, such broad investigations and comparisons are a reasonable next step in understanding the role of cultural elements in PTG. One question about the impact of these broad influences, which has some beginning answers, is whether PTG is a concept unique to the North American context, where much of the early systematic work on it was done (Affleck, Tennen, Croog, & Levine, 1987; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). There are now many studies of PTG from various parts of the world, suggesting that the experience of growth is not uniquely American. Only a few studies comparing findings from different countries have been done, but these suggest possible differences in the amount and nature of PTG. For example, factor analysis of the *Posttraumatic Growth Inventory* (PTGI) from the U.S. and Australian samples has suggested that the same factor structure of the scale holds in both places (Morris, Shakespeare-Finch, Rieck, & Newbery, 2005); Australian participants have reported moderate levels of growth, whereas similar U.S. participants, however, have tended to report high levels (Morris et al., 2005; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996). Specifically, U.S. participants have tended to report more growth on the Spiritual Change factor than their Australian counterparts do.

These cross-national differences may be influenced by broad, distal cultural factors such as the prevailing narratives and general cultural themes at work in those two different locations. For example, because the United States is a more religious country than Australia (more U.S. residents report a belief in God than do Australians), with more salient religious themes, Australians might be expected to report less change on PTGI items that tap spiritual or religious dimensions than Americans do. In addition, items tapping growth in religious areas would be considered irrelevant for populations where agnosticism and atheism are the norm rather than the exception. For example, we have anecdotal reports that some participants in Germany have been offended by questions about growth in religious domains. To the extent that such views pervade a particular culture or subculture and are part of broader sociocultural narratives, it is reasonable to expect that growth, at least in the spiritual or religious realm, will be less likely.

Some broad cultural themes may themselves contain elements that implicitly expect or encourage the experience of PTG. The U.S. narrative has been described as having the general characteristic of a belief in progress, including the assumption that individuals have the ability to bring about positive change. As previously indicated, McAdams (2006) has suggested that for some U.S. residents, a component of the broad story that helps form and organize an understanding of their life experiences is the theme of encountering bad things, suffering, but expecting that positive changes will occur and that suffering will be redeemed. Although this is not a description of PTG *per se*, it is a way of understanding things that are compatible with, and perhaps encouraging of, the possibilities for growth from the encounter with crisis. There are also some data suggesting that PTG itself may be part of the general U.S. narrative. Although very preliminary, data obtained by one of our doctoral students, Cassie Lindstrom, suggest that PTG may also be a significant component of the narrative of some U.S. residents.

As part of a larger study, she asked 212 university students whether they had ever heard or read stories about people going through hard times and changing for the better, and whether they had met such people personally. Contrary to the expectation of significant variability, 98 percent of the students indicated having heard or read stories of people who

had experienced positive change as the result of their struggle with difficult circumstances, and 86 percent indicated having met such people. These very limited and unrepresentative results suggest that, along with stories of redemption, themes of PTG may also be an integral part of the broader U.S. narrative. To the extent that the prevailing narratives of different countries and cultures do not contain such elements of redemption or growth, or where those elements are weaker or less pervasive, one might expect lower levels in the growth experienced and reported.

One way in which the themes of PTG in the distal culture may have an influence on individuals is through the availability of those same themes in primary reference groups. Expectations about PTG by primary reference groups, for example, may lead to higher rates of reported, and perhaps experienced, growth. A simple way to assess the influence of such factors in the proximate culture is to ask about the availability of models of PTG. Indeed, individuals who had experienced domestic violence or cancer, and who reported knowing a person with similar problems who had changed in positive ways, tended to report higher levels of growth than those who did not know such a person (Cobb, Tedeschi, Calhoun, & Cann, 2006; Weiss, 2004). Thus, the availability of role models in one's own social groups may be as influential, and perhaps more influential, than the distal broad societal themes.

Our general assumption is that the idioms of trauma, coping, and growth, the social norms and rules about trauma, its aftermath, and the views about what helps, in both proximate and distal forms, are likely to play a role in the kinds and degree of growth that is experienced and acknowledged. A major challenge is the development of methodologies that allow for specific testing in systematic and quantitative ways of the impact of these various sociocultural elements on PTG.

THE MODEL OF POSTTRAUMATIC GROWTH

We have developed a reasonably comprehensive model of the process of PTG. Figure 1.1 presents the most current version, revised on the basis of new findings that help shape our understanding of the processes involved. As the schematic illustrates, it begins with the person pretrauma and ends with positive changes that can occur from the struggle with life crises. We have always posited that it is the disruption of one's assumptive beliefs, rather than the characteristics of the event itself, that initiates the processes that can ultimately result in PTG. One of the latest revisions of our model is the more explicit recognition that the same event can challenge some people's assumptive worlds and produce a traumatic effect while others can easily fit the event into their assumptive beliefs. In the context of the current volume, it is important to keep in mind that a variety of cultural influences can play a significant role in shaping the assumptive beliefs that determine the ways in which an event is perceived. To allow a better appreciation of the role of challenges to assumptive beliefs, we have recently been developing a brief measure (*Core Beliefs Inventory*) that directly assesses the degree to which people are led to examine their assumptive beliefs following a significant stressor (Cann, Calhoun, Tedeschi, Kilmer, & Gil-Rivas, 2007). Our preliminary findings support the idea that the degree to which an event leads people to examine their core beliefs is marginally related to the stress reported (r 's around .20), but strongly related to

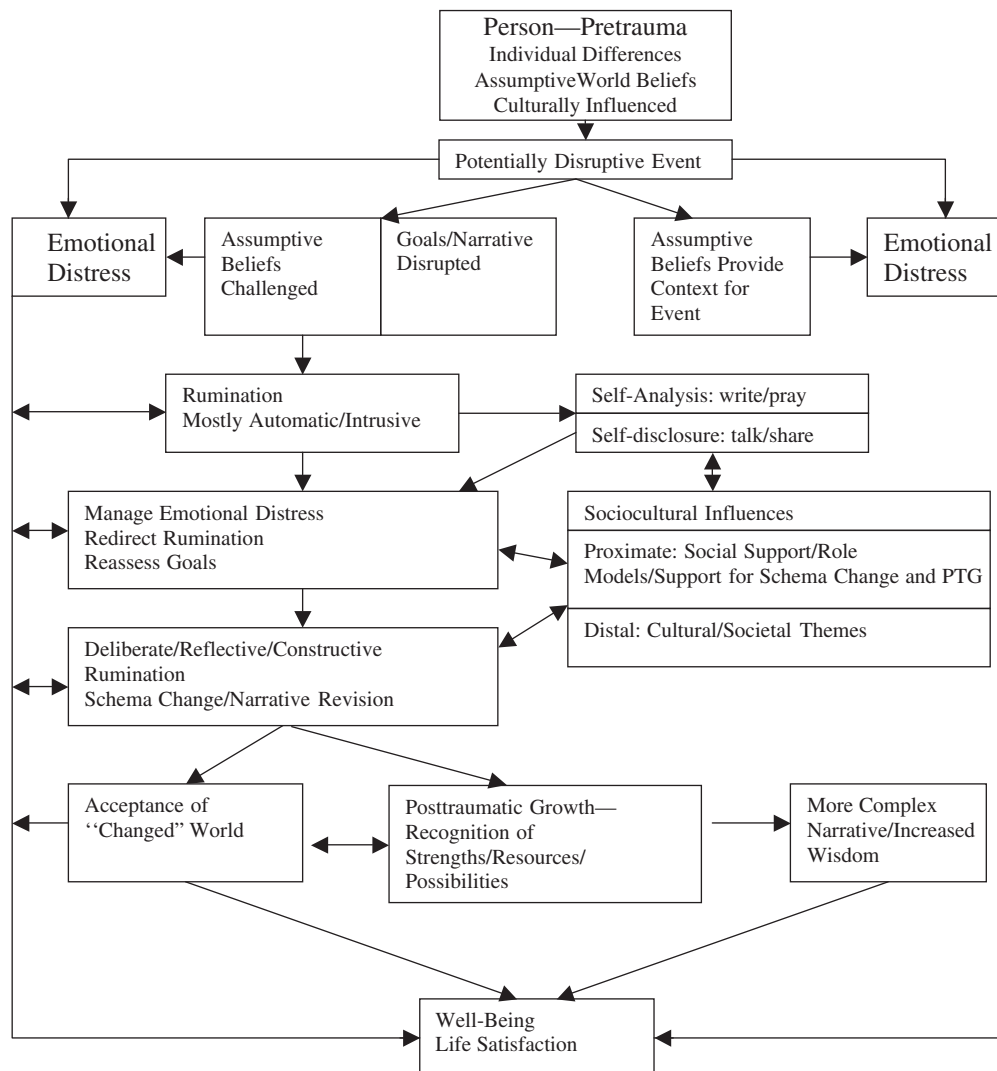


Figure 1.1 A Comprehensive Model of PTG.

experienced growth (r 's over .50). It is important to note that emotional distress is still likely to occur following exposure to very stressful events, even when the events are consistent with one's assumptive beliefs, as in the case of accepting the death of a close other as part of the way life unfolds.

Another aspect of the process that the revised diagram now includes is the nature of the relationship between PTG and indicators of well-being or life satisfaction. *It is important to note that people can experience growth and distress concurrently.* Although for some

people, it is possible that PTG facilitates the development of new wisdom, which eventually leads to well-being, no such relationship necessarily exists. Growth is likely to be more strongly related to a sense of wisdom reflected in a narrative that recognizes the complexity of the world than to simple measures of general happiness or depression.

The revised schematic of the model also adds clarification of the interaction between rumination and levels of distress. Rumination soon after the event, in the form of intrusive thoughts, is likely to be positively associated both with emotional distress and the disruption of beliefs. As rumination moves into less intrusive and more deliberate forms, which represent efforts to make sense of the event and rebuild the assumptive beliefs, the levels of distress can motivate the person to work toward an understanding, which in turn may affect the distress experienced.

Although it is not exhaustive and some of its components (for example, sociocultural influences) are themselves quite complex, this model is more comprehensive than is typical in the current social and behavioral sciences. More detailed descriptions of earlier versions of the model can be found elsewhere (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998, 2004, 2006; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 2004). We highlight the way in which cultural factors might affect some of the elements described in the model in the following section.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES AND THE PTG MODEL: SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

In this section, we offer a look at how sociocultural influences may play a role in two major components of the PTG model: ruminative processes and self-disclosure.

Cultural Influences: Rumination and Growth

Rumination in the context of PTG involves the cognitive work precipitated by the need to revise or reestablish beliefs that constitute the individual's assumptive world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). Traumatic events are likely to cause some examination of assumptive world beliefs, with more devastating or seismic events leading to more disruption of these beliefs and more potential cognitive work (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1998, 2006). It is through this process of examining one's life in the aftermath of a traumatic event, in the context of basic assumptions about how events were expected to unfold, how one is connected to others, and how one is able to affect outcomes and experiences, that the potential to recognize and appreciate PTG occurs. *Growth is not an inevitable outcome of this cognitive work*, but it is quite common under conditions that encourage growth. In keeping with broader definitions of rumination (Martin & Tesser, 1989, 1996, 2006) and the increasing recognition of positive styles of rumination (Watkins, 2008), our PTG model assumes that although posttraumatic rumination can be intrusive, negative, and depressogenic (Nolen-Hoeksema, Larson, & Grayson, 1999), it can also be reflective (Treynor, Gonzalez, & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2003), deliberate (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006), and focused on making sense of events (Martin & Tesser, 1996), leading to more positive experiences.

Rumination across Cultures

Although most of the early work looking at rumination in response to stressors was done with samples from the United States, a number of studies have shown that rumination, especially negative forms, is evident in samples from different cultural contexts. For example, Zou and Gan (2007) found that rumination mediated the relationship of locus of control with depression in a Chinese sample; negative rumination was also found to enhance social anxiety among Japanese students (Shirotsuki, Sasagawa, & Nomura, 2007), whereas the more reflective style of rumination appeared to help reduce depressive feelings in another sample of Japanese students (Noguchi & Fujiu, 2007); among undergraduate students in the Netherlands, those who tended to ruminate more about the causes of sadness showed higher levels of depression over time (Roelofs, Muris, Huibers, Peeters, & Arntz, 2006).

We know of only one study that has examined rumination following traumatic experiences comparing samples from two different cultural backgrounds. Taku, Cann, Tedeschi, and Calhoun (2009) looked at the relationship between PTG and intrusive versus deliberate rumination in samples from the United States and Japan. Intrusive rumination represents thoughts that come to mind almost automatically and usually include content that is unpleasant, while deliberate rumination involves efforts to find meaning or make sense of one's experiences. Taku et al. found considerable similarity across the two samples in the relationships between PTG and rumination, but deliberate rumination soon after a traumatic experience was more strongly predictive of growth in the Japanese sample. Overall, the evidence for the occurrence of rumination posttrauma in multiple cultures is clear, but to what extent might the nature of the rumination vary across cultures?

Cultural Influences on Cognitive Strategies

Nisbett (2003) has summarized research suggesting some very basic differences in how people from different cultures think about events in their worlds. His focus was on the United States and Western Europe versus East Asian cultures, but the differences probably exist in varying degrees across additional cultures. He believes that variations in cognitive styles emerged from the early philosophical assumptions that guided the development of strategies for understanding the world in these cultures. Some of the differences could clearly have implications for the nature of rumination in the aftermath of a highly stressful experience. The style of rumination most likely to facilitate PTG involves rebuilding basic assumptions about how events unfold in one's world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992). How might one's distal culture shape that process? There are at least three belief areas in which very basic cognitive strategies might be important: personal control, sources of causation, and stability over time. Although there may be other ways in which the cognitive processes are culturally altered, these areas can provide examples to help appreciate the possible influences of cultural context on PTG.

Westerners tend to believe that they have the potential to exert personal control over events much more than Easterners who tend to believe that they should adjust themselves to the situations they encounter (Morling, Kitayama, & Miyamoto, 2002; Morris & Peng, 1994; Nisbett, 2003). Thus, when a traumatic event is encountered, it is likely that

Westerners will assume more personal responsibility for the event and therefore need to explain their traumatic experiences based on their own actions. They also may be more likely to identify changes in personal strengths as they deal with the event and assume personal responsibility for any positive changes. Easterners may invest more energy in finding ways to adjust to an event for which they feel less responsible. As they ruminate, they may come to see the world differently rather than identifying changes in themselves.

In a similar vein, Westerners tend to believe that the qualities or traits of individuals are more important causal forces than are the situations within which events unfold (Choi, Nisbett & Norenzayan, 1999; Kitayama & Uchida, 2005). Once again, this could affect the individual's rumination after a stressful event so that Westerners tend to focus attention on personal qualities when searching for a way to understand the event. For those from Western countries, the question may be, "What is it about me that led to this trauma?" Those from Eastern countries may be seeking answers or meaning in the context of the event, "How can I adapt myself in this situation?" or "How can I avoid these situations?"

Cultural differences in fundamental assumptions about stability and change over time may also shape rumination. Individuals raised in Western cultures tend to believe that events unfold in a relatively linear fashion, with stable forces producing a predictable future, whereas Easterners assume nonlinear cycles and anticipate both changes and possible contradictions (Ji, 2005; Ji, Nisbett, & Su, 2001). For example, when Chinese children were asked to predict future events or likely future feelings, they expected much more change than did Canadian children, and the differences increased with age (Ji, 2008). Assuming that disruption of expectations is what precipitates the posttraumatic rumination that can lead to growth, it would seem that people whose worldviews anticipate change and accept contradictions would experience less cognitive disruption when a stressful event occurs. This does not mean that the event is any less difficult; it would simply be less disruptive to the assumptive world and less likely to promote personal growth because even though things seem bad right now, that does not imply that they will stay bad (Ji, Zhang, Osborne, & Guan, 2004).

Cultural Influences on Content of Rumination

In addition to influencing cognitive strategies, broad cultural factors can also shape the ways in which individuals see themselves and their relationships with others. A broad distinction that has been used to describe these variations is the characterization of individuals as independent, which is promoted by individualistic cultures or interdependent, as encouraged by collectivist cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1995). Independent individuals define themselves by how they differ from others, their uniqueness, and their personal accomplishments; they prefer individual action and strive to meet personal goals. Interdependent individuals focus on their relationships with others; they prefer collective action and try not to stand out from the crowd, seeking harmony with others and being sensitive to their potential impact on them. People in independent cultural contexts may enhance their sense of self through accomplishments that distinguish them from others whereas persons in interdependent contexts seek to maintain face by fitting in, meeting group expectations, and being respected by important others (Heine, 2005).

When ruminating in the aftermath of a significant stressful event, interdependent individuals would be expected to consider seriously how their reactions to the event might affect others as well as themselves. Cohen and colleagues (Cohen & Hoshino-Browne, 2005; Cohen, Hoshino-Browne, & Leung, 2007) have demonstrated that interdependent individuals tend to think about their own actions as if they were observing them like an outsider. They try to see themselves as others see them, rather than as the world would look from their personal perspective, and they are much more aware of how they appear to others. Any concerns about their traumatic experience would be filtered through a lens based on how it would be viewed by others in their primary reference groups. For example, Cheng, Leong and Geist (1993) found that Asian university students, more so than U.S. students, tended not to seek help for emotional or interpersonal problems, but did seek help for career and academic problems, even though the prevalence of emotional issues was higher among the Asian students. Cheng et al. (1993) believe this is most likely due to the stigma associated with emotional problems in Asian cultures (Tracey, Leong, & Glidden, 1986) and the students' felt need to honor their families and maintain face by not publicly acknowledging these problems.

A similar cultural expectation could also influence the emotional content of information considered when ruminating. Matsumoto, Takeuchi, Andayani, Kouznetsova, and Krupp (1998) examined the rules governing the display of emotion that are prevalent in cultures classified along the collectivist-individualist dimension. In collectivist cultures, where interdependence is fostered, expression of positive emotions is encouraged and expression of negative emotions is discouraged. The expression of negative emotions, like the presentation of emotional problems, is seen as potentially disruptive to the harmony of the group. Thus, interdependent individuals might need to work through their experiences of negative thoughts solely in their ruminations, since sharing those issues with others could be met with disapproval. Thus, the public face of the interdependent person dealing with a trauma may present a positive state, but the private thoughts may be dominated by negative emotions that must be handled internally.

Cultural Influences: Self-Disclosure and Growth

A second important component of our model of PTG, likely to be affected by cultural influences, is self-disclosure. We emphasize the importance of self-disclosure and social responses to it in generating the possibility for new schemas that can aid in coping and perhaps facilitate PTG. At times, in the aftermath of trauma, relationships with others may be characterized by *more* disclosure than has been commonplace in the individual's life, driven by emotional distress, need for new ideas about how to proceed in life, and by attempts to construct a new narrative, a new life story. Cultural considerations can enter this process through both distal and proximal influences.

Distal cultural influences on self-disclosure can occur through general societal norms about disclosure of certain kinds of personal information, in certain contexts, by individuals who have particular roles (for example, gender roles). For example, cultures vary in the degree to which barriers exist to disclosure about certain traumas such as childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, HIV status, and combat experiences. There is little empirical study

of these patterns, and some research has shown surprising results in the investigation of disclosure tendencies, running counter to some cultural stereotypes. For example, in one study, Argentineans reported more willingness to disclose than North Americans, males were more willing to disclose than females, and U.S. males reported being more willing to disclose to women than to men (Horenstein & Downey, 2003). Differences may also exist within societies. For example, in India, Muslim males have been shown to disclose more than Hindus (Sinha, 1976). These differences in self-disclosure can be affected by encounters with a different culture. For example, following relocation, and thereby changing the proximate culture and its influence on the discloser, people make conscious decisions about the appropriateness of disclosure in the new context (Hastings, 2000).

The influences of the distal culture are most clearly seen, perhaps, in situations of a publicly shared tragedy (Lattanzi-Licht & Doka, 2003). In such instances, venues for the public expression of grief and emotions connected with the tragedy are sometimes available through rituals and memorials. There is evidence from a study of social sharing in the aftermath of the Madrid train bombings, that participation in demonstrations and communal coping may have enhanced positive emotional responses such as hope, trust, and a sense of solidarity. In addition, these changes were accompanied by beliefs in the possibility for PTG (Paez, Basabe, Ubillos, & Gonzalez-Castro, 2007). Mass media can play a role in emphasizing community solidarity and enhancing recognition that others have similar experiences as well as focus attention on the desirability of mutual help (Conejero & Etxebarria, 2007). This, in turn, may prompt willingness to self-disclose based on the assumption that persons in the primary reference groups will respond supportively and positively to the disclosure. Individual self-disclosure may be accomplished in quite public ways through artistic or political expressions, which can become the basis for PTG that extends beyond the individual and can affect the cultural response to trauma in very profound ways (Bloom, 1998; Tedeschi, 1999).

A CLINICAL FOOTNOTE: THE PROXIMATE CULTURE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

We have emphasized the importance of the proximate culture elsewhere, that is, the direct interpersonal connections people have, in our description of the ways professionals can assist survivors of trauma and facilitate growth through *expert companionship* (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004, 2006). This approach to counseling can be conceptualized as a way of adding to the proximate cultural context a specific kind of professional relationship that has its own roles, norms, and rules, and that provides survivors with an opportunity for disclosure as well as for consideration of various perspectives on the major stressor and its aftermath. The likelihood of PTG may increase in this social setting of support, acceptance, and the exploration of ideas about existential issues that is congruent with the client's distal and proximate sociocultural contexts (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006).

As an expert, the professional helper provides an opportunity that can offset culturally based conceptions, including proscriptions against all disclosure that may interfere with finding peace and achieving growth in the aftermath of very stressful events (Calhoun

& Tedeschi, 1999). Such clinical work needs to be done with great sensitivity to the client's own cultural influences, both distal and proximate, and when there is a contradiction between the culture of therapy and the client's own various sociocultural influences, clinicians should proceed with great caution and sensitivity (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 1999). The degree to which the professional helper encourages self-disclosure must be determined with a keen awareness of sociocultural influences on both practitioner and client, and on the factors that encourage, hinder, or discourage the expression and experience of PTG in particular. This may be a long journey.

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