



Blackie, Laura E.R. and Jayawickreme, Eranda (2015)
The example of adverse life experiences as unique
situations. *European Journal of Personality*, 29 (3). pp.
285-386. ISSN 1099-0984 (In Press)

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The Example of Adverse Life Experiences as Unique Situations

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Accepted for Publication in *European Journal of Personality* published by Wiley. This article may not exactly replicate the final version published in the Wiley journal. A link to the published article: DOI: 10.1002/per.2005

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Word Count = 970

Abstract

In this commentary, we relate Rauthmann et al's arguments to the study of positive personality change in the wake of the experience of adversity, or post-traumatic growth.

The nature of adversity-relevant situations—and how individuals respond to such situations— may in part determine whether post-traumatic growth ultimately occurs.

Additionally, we question whether the author's strong commitment to the Approximation Corollary is good for situation research in naturalistic settings.

The Example of Adverse Life Experiences as Unique Situations

Rauthmann, Sherman and Funder's excellent target article (this issue) will hopefully stimulate a new wave of high-quality conceptual, methodological, and empirical work on situations and person-situation transactions. In this commentary, we relate Rauthmann et al's arguments to the study of positive personality change in the wake of the experience of adversity, or post-traumatic growth (PTG; Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014; Blackie & Jayawickreme, 2014). We note that that the authors have already engaged this topic in a thoughtful commentary published last year (Jones, Brown, Serfass, & Sherman, 2014).

Post-traumatic Growth as Positive Personality Change

PTG is defined as positive psychological change experienced as a result of the struggle with highly challenging life circumstances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). It is typically seen as distinct from resilience, which is generally defined as the absence of negative outcomes during or following potentially harmful circumstances (e.g., Seery, Holman, & Silver, 2010). While it remains uncertain whether or not retrospective self-perceptions of PTG correspond to changes in behavior and cognition measured longitudinally (Blackie, Jayawickreme, Helzer, Forgeard, & Roepke, 2015; Jayawickreme & Blackie 2014; Schueller et al. 2015), individuals high in self-perceived PTG report experiencing a greater appreciation of life, more-intimate social relationships, heightened feelings of personal strength, greater engagement with spiritual questions, and the recognition of new possibilities for their lives (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). To the

extent to which PTG is veridical (Fleeson, 2014; Frazier, Tennen, & Coyne, 2014), such growth may occur, at least in part, because of changes in situations that one experiences following adversity. For example, Jones et al. (2014) provide the example of a how a bereaved parent may experience a change in their daily situations that are a continuous reminder of the recent loss of a child, and as a result these situations may eventually facilitate PTG. For example, the parent may seek out situations that offer social support more frequently, thereby strengthening their social relationships. While the example given by Jones et al. (2014) applies well to how individuals adapt to single traumatic events, many adverse life events are not one-shot events, but are instead chronic in nature. Such events may include unemployment (Lucas et al., 2003), chronic illness (Tennen & Affleck, 1998), and daily hassles resulting from a traumatic event (e.g. lack of sanitation facilities and housing following a natural disaster; Miller & Rasmussen, 2014).

In other words, the adversity an individual needs to respond to may consist of *a series of situations*. The nature of these situations—and how individuals respond to such situations— may in part determine whether PTG ultimately occurs. The innovative model Rauthmann et al., (this issue) propose allows this hypothesis to be tested – researchers could utilize an experience sampling methodology to capture the types of situations (“cues”) individuals experience after adversity, and determine whether the psychological meaning (“characteristics”) individuals derive from these situations capture the theorized domains of PTG. Indeed, our own “gold standard” PTG study (Jayawickreme & Blackie, 2014) should be revised in light of this model to include the measurement of situations. However, this method is not without challenges given the distinctiveness of adverse situations, as we will now discuss.

Challenges in the Study of Situations and PTG

First, researchers would need to investigate the types of situations people are most likely to experience following adversity. Although, the “Situational Eight” DIAMONDS model (Rauthmann et al. 2014) does contain an adversity category; coping and coming to terms with a highly stressful experience is likely to expand beyond feeling threatened. The DIAMONDS model may capture more “everyday situations” and adversity certainly does not fall into that criteria. One factor that may distinguish adversity-relevant situations from others is that the individual frequently does not choose to be placed in such situations (e.g. no one ever chooses to be the victim of adversity). Thus, one distinctive feature of adversity-relevant situations is that they are imposed on individuals, as opposed to individuals selecting them. We agree with the authors that the individual’s response to such adversity-relevant situations may determine whether PTG ultimately occurs. However, one relevant factor is the control the individual has to change the situation in order to reduce the adversity’s impact. In such instances, being able to flexibly utilize the skills associated with primary control (controlling the situation) and secondary control (controlling one’s response to the situation) depending on the specifics of the situation would be key to the promotion of PTG (Helzer & Jayawickreme, 2015).

Querying the Rigidity of the Approximation Corollary

Following Jones et al. (2014), we believe situations should be studied as part of understanding the processes that facilitate PTG, and as discussed earlier our ideal longitudinal PTG study design described in Jayawickreme and Blackie (2014) can be modified to include information about situations. However, such a longitudinal study of people in daily life will most likely only be able to collect the target’s perception of the

situation. Rauthmann et al. (this issue) clearly take a strong stand against having a single rater on the situation: “However, a situation should not be defined solely by one person’s perception of it (Approximation Corollary), but validated against or made relative to (knowledgeable) others’ views” (footnote 13). Such a stance makes the possibility of such research utilizing experience sampling methods in real life before and after the trauma highly impractical.

Moreover, the authors themselves have argued in past work that multiple prior studies in their lab show that the vast majority of the variance in situation ratings is due to the situation itself rather than to participants’ idiosyncratic perceptions (Rauthmann, 2012; Serfass & Sherman, 2013; Sherman, Rauthmann, Brown, Serfass, & Jones, in press). We query why Rauthmann and colleagues would take such a strong stance here, where one practical outcome would be the discouraging of naturalistic daily life studies examining unique situations vital for understanding their role in such outcomes as PTG.

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