

Stories we tell about national trauma reflect our psychological well-being

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A new study by psychologists at the University at Buffalo and the F. W. Olin College of Engineering finds that in the aftermath of national trauma, the ability to make sense out of what happened has implications for individual well-being and that the kinds of stories people tell about the incident predict very different psychological outcomes for them.

The study, "The Political is Personal: Narrating 9/11 and Psychological Well-Being," is by Jonathan M. Adler, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology at Olin, and Michael J. Poulin, Ph.D., assistant professor of psychology at UB.

"Understanding the stories people tell about national events provides a unique opportunity to understand how individual well-being is linked to the state of the society," Poulin explains.

The study is published in the August issue of [Journal of Personality](#).

"Our findings suggest that different ways of writing about the events of 9/11 relate to different psychological outcomes," Poulin says, and that the different ways people describe traumatic national events -- even those they do not experience directly -- are linked to different levels of psychological adaptation.

"To sum up," he says, "we found that psychological well-being was associated with post-trauma stories that were high in closure, high in

redemptive imagery and high in themes of national redemption. [Psychological distress](#), on the other hand, was significantly related to accounts that were low in closure, high in contaminative imagery and high in themes of personal contamination."

The researchers looked at personal accounts about experiences of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 written by 395 adults from across the country, some of whom were more intimately connected to the events in question than were others. They then compared the narratives with various measures of their psychological well-being.

"Accounts high in 'closure' are those that demonstrate an emotional conclusion or a coherent resolution of a difficult life event," Poulin says, "and perhaps not surprisingly, participants who described the terrorist attacks with a sense that they were really over and no longer exerted an emotional influence had low levels of distress and high levels of well-being.

"However, we also found that a high level of psychological well-being was significantly related to accounts that were high in references to national redemption and, among those more directly exposed to the attacks, high in redemptive imagery in general," he says.

He describes "redemptive accounts" as those that tell a story of something positive coming out of something negative. Adler notes that the theme of redemption has been characterized as a particularly American theme, observed in national rhetoric throughout history and in the personal stories of many well-known Americans.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, Adler and Poulin found that psychological distress was significantly related to accounts low in closure and high in contamination imagery or themes of personal contamination.

"Contamination," Poulin says, "is reflected in stories in which what was 'good' or 'acceptable' becomes contaminated, ruined, undermined, undone or spoiled. It is basically the opposite of redemption and may therefore be somewhat opposed to the themes of traditional American stories."

The study, funded by the National Science Foundation, is grounded in the theoretical tradition of the narrative study of lives. It involved a nationally representative sample of adults who wrote accounts about the 9/11 [terrorist attacks](#) approximately two months after they occurred.

The study participants were among more than 1,000 respondents who earlier had completed a two-month post-9/11 survey that included a number of open-ended questions related to their 9/11 experiences: their individual experiences on Sept. 11, 2001, how they made sense of the attacks and their aftermath, and whether they had been able to find positive consequences.

Those selected for the study were respondents who had contributed enough descriptive material to be coded for narrative themes of closure redemption and contamination.

The participants also completed a demographic survey, a mental-health questionnaire and answered questions about whether they had ever experienced any of 30 negative life events such as natural disaster or child abuse. They were assessed for their degree of exposure to the events of 9/11, and their levels of psychological well-being and distress were analyzed using well-known psychological scales.

More information: An online version of the study can be found online at the journal site: www3.interscience.wiley.com/cgi-bin/jpages/122387789/HTMLSTART

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