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The Traumatic Life Experiences and Ontological Well-Being: Insights from Narrative Psychology and Self-Memory Theory

Seçil BÜLBÜL¹, Serin İŞİAÇIK²

Abstract

Ontological well-being adopts a holistic perspective on well-being like the narrative psychology when analysing life histories by referring to past, present, and future aspects of one's life. Relatedly, the self-memory view proposes that life events are self-evaluated. Based on the narrative psychology and self-memory approach, affective life events have a role in structuring self-perceptions and well-being. Therefore, turbulent external conditions such as the pandemic, uncertain environments and socio-economic challenges may lead to unpleasant experiences for individuals. This study aims to examine the relationship between the perceived effects of traumatic life experiences and ontological well-being within the period of COVID 19 pandemic. It is intended to reveal the impact of traumatic experiences on ontological well-being of individuals in work life. A cross-sectional study was utilized throughout an online survey with the participation of 270 employees working in various private organizations. Following the statistical analyses, the findings were evaluated and both conceptual and practical discussions were provided.

Keywords: *Ontological well-being, Post-traumatic stress disorder, Well-being, Traumatic life experiences, Narrative psychology, Self-memory theory.*

1. Introduction

The turbulent external conditions (i.e., the pandemic outbreak and related socio-economic challenges) can damage the wellness of individuals, and employees may encounter many critical incidents during work. Being exposed to traumatic events and experiencing post-traumatic stress is expected to influence mental health, well-being, and organizational behaviors. While post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a clinical term and classified as a mental disorder that needs the attention of mental health professionals, a non-clinical assessment of PTSD is crucial to unveil the

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attitudes and behaviors in several social contexts (i.e., organizations). As such, the current study aims to understand the effect of the emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral symptoms that are related to post-traumatic stress disorder and the ontological well-being of individuals (Açıkgöz Karaoğlu, 2016).

2. Conceptual Framework: Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Ontological Well-Being

Although previous evidence showed that overall life satisfaction of individuals with PTSD is relatively low (Keim, Malesky, & Strauser, 2003), there is a gap in research on post-trauma experiences in social contexts and their effect on well-being. Particularly, within the scope of positive psychology, well-being, resilience, life satisfaction, and happiness have been studied (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Diener, 2009; Lemay & Ghazal, 2001; Seligman, et al., 2005; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Recent research on well-being has proposed the concept of ontological well-being rather than the hedonic or eudaimonic approaches of well-being. Ontological well-being refers to a holistic approach by defining the subjective cognitive and emotional evaluation of one's life in a whole-time perspective. In other words, it is defined by individuals' assessment of their life as a project by considering their lives in the past, present, and future (Şimşek & Kocayoruk, 2013). Parallel with the narrative psychology and self-memory approaches, ontological well-being suggests that humans as the authors of their lives have their personal stories that can only be evaluated by themselves (Brown, 2006; Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; Şimşek, 2009). Previous evidence showed the relationship between ontological well-being and several psychological factors as emotional intelligence, depression, five-factor model of personality, attachment, perceived parenting style, the purpose of life, emotional well-being, and early maladaptive schemas (Açıkgöz & Karaoğlu, 2016; Kuzu-Tascı 2014; Şimşek & Kocayoruk 2013; Yaman- Karahan 2016). Based on the theory and previous findings, PTSD-related symptoms can be expected to predict the perceived ontological well-being of individuals. Hence, the hypothesis of the current research is as follows (Friedman, 2013).

Hypothesis: Perceived post-traumatic disorder symptoms negatively influence the perceived ontological well-being of individuals.

3. Methodology

An online survey was conducted with a convenience sampling method. The sample consists of 270 (89 males, 181 females) participants. The mean educational level completed (1= Primary school, 2= High school, 3= Bachelor's degree, 4= Master's degree, 5= PhD) was 3.11 ($SD= 0.93$). Most of the participants were single individuals (58.1%). 63.7% of the sample stated having a challenging and/or traumatic life experience in the past and 23.3.% of the participants have witnessed a closed one's traumatic experience. The frequency of experiencing traumatic events was mostly remarked as 'more than once' ($M= 1.90$, $SD= .42$). 40.7% of individuals stated that natural disasters, accidents, unintentional human mistakes, uncontrollable environmental health/politics, etc. are the causes of their traumatic experience.

The DSM-IV-based "Post-traumatic Stress Disorder Checklist-Civilian" (PCL-C) with 17 items was used to address the symptoms after the traumatic experiences. The items have five levels indicating how much the respondent has been troubled by the symptoms (re-experiencing, avoidance, and hyperarousal) in the recent days, most frequently during the past few months. Hence, the participants rated their experiences as 0 (never) to 5 (always). Since this study does not have a clinical diagnosis purpose and the checklist was considered as suitable for the scope of the study, a scale based on DSM-IV classification was used (Keirn, et al., 2003).

"The ontological well-being" scale, developed by Şimsek and Kocayörük (2013), consists of a total of 24 items assessing the individuals' self-assessment for their past, present, and future. The scale has four sub-dimensions: "nothingness", "activation", "regret", and "hope". The internal reliability of the scale was .91 (Şimşek & Kocayörük, 2013) and .75 in the present study. The ratings are based on a five-point scale for each question by evaluating through; "I don't feel at all" (1) to "I feel very intensely" (5).

4. Findings

Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) was performed to assess the factorial structure. The factors were named as "present activation", "past regret", "future hope", and "present nothingness", and they were included in the later analyses for a detailed understanding. Correlation analysis (Table 1) and simple regression analysis were performed to evaluate the relationships between the variables. There was a significant moderate relationship between PTSD and past regret; the negative and low relationship between

PTSD and future hope; the positive and moderate relationship between PTSD and present nothingness ($p<.01$). The descriptive results showed that symptoms of PTSD ($M=3.68$, $SD=1.06$) was relatively high among the participants, and the magnitude of present nothingness ($M= 2.85$, $SD=1.11$) was higher than the other factors of ontological well-being.

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. PTSD	3.67	1.06		-.334 **	.630 **	-.198 **	.558 **
2.Present activation	2.48	1.00			-.321**	.540 **	-.442**
3.Past regret	2.02	0.87				-.273 **	.629 **
4.Future hope	1.89	1.06					-.357**
5.Present nothingness	2.85	1.11					

** $p<.01$

Table 2. Results of Simple Regression Analyses

Independent variable: PTSD	Beta	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i> value
Present activation	-.334	5.807	0.01
$R=.334$; $R^2=.112$; F Value=33.719			
Past regret	.630	13,264	0.00
$R=.630$; $R^2=.397$; F Value=176,460			
Present nothingness	.558	11.006	0.00
$R=.558$; $R^2=.311$; F Value=121,128			
Future hope	-.198	3.301	0.001
$R=.198$; $R^2=.039$; F Value= 10.896			

Regression analysis also showed that perceived PTSD symptoms significantly predict each of the components of ontological well-being. (Table 2). Hence, the main hypothesis of the study was supported. PTSD explained 11% percent of the change in present time activation, 40% of the change in past time regret, %0.5 of the change in future hope, 31% of the change in present time nothingness perception.

5. Discussion and Future Suggestions

Individuals' experiences of stressful events and traumatic incidents are important for organizational psychology (Tehrani, 2017). Perceived

PTSD symptoms contributed to individuals' ontological well-being in the current research. These results may provide implications for today's work life-mental health (World Health Organisation, 2010) and ontological well-being of employees, and positive organizational behavior interventions can be implemented to increase ontological well-being. Based on current findings and previous evidence (Mohr, et al., 2021), this study suggests that the positive psychology approach in organizations not only increases positive behaviors but can also reduce negative emotions, behaviors, and attitudes. Nonetheless, future research should have more sample size to enable better generalizability of the findings. In addition, demographic characteristics may be included in the following research models as moderating variables.

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