Romantic Relationship Dissolutions: Assessing Posttraumatic Growth Cross-Culturally Between American and Japanese Undergraduate Students  
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Abstract
Past research has assessed how romantic relationship issues affect an individual negatively, including physical and psychological distress. However, there is limited research that shows how these relationship issues can affect an individual positively. This study examined relationship problems of American and Japanese undergraduate students and posttraumatic growth. Overall experiences with romantic relationship issues between American and Japanese students was first assessed, and found American students reported overall more experiences with romantic problems than Japanese students. These participants were further assessed to see if there are significant differences in those who have selected romantic relationship problems as their most stressful event. No significant differences were found between American and Japanese undergraduate students. Seeing as American and Japanese students had differing experiences with romantic problems, different reactions to these experiences could result. Total posttraumatic growth was assessed in those who had not experienced a romantic relationship problem, those who had experienced a romantic problem but did not report it as the most stressful event, and those who had reported romantic relationship problems as the most stressful life event. Overall significant differences were found in both American and Japanese students. Clinicians can create intervention programs from these results that provide emotional support through a romantic relationship issue, as well as educating the individual about PTG, acknowledging positive outcomes can come from the dissolution.

Keywords: Romantic problems, PTG, experience, American, Japanese
It has been seen in a variety of previous studies that traumatic life events can cause differing physical and psychological reactions in individuals. To assess these reactions, many researchers have focused their efforts on certain severe events experienced such as death in the family (Polantinsky and Esprey, 2001). However, past studies have a tendency to only focus on traumatic events that may be seen as severe, and have overlooked other events that also may cause psychological stress, such as interpersonal issues or more specifically romantic relationship dissolutions. Previous studies have shown that interpersonal issues do have a strong impact on an individual’s emotions and behavior. Garcia and Lane (2012) focused on girls and women admitted into juvenile delinquent systems and assessed why they committed the crimes they did to end up in these facilities. Results showed that the most common responses to why the crimes were committed were due to interpersonal problems. It can be seen that because of interpersonal issues, individuals tend to commonly have negative psychological reactions. Aside from behavioral issues, previous studies have shown that those who have reported a break-up within the last year have suffered with major depression (Monroe, Rhode, Seeley & Lewinsohn, 1999). Along with developing depression, studies have shown that not only do relationship issues cause more negative emotional issues (Sprecher, 1994), but physical reactions can also arise when dealing with a romantic issue such as sleeplessness and suicidal thoughts. Although researchers have focused on the negative outcomes experienced after romantic relationship dissolutions, few studies have focused on positive outcomes that could be experienced, such as posttraumatic growth which can be defined as the positive psychological change experienced as a result of struggle with highly challenging life circumstances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Tashiro and Frazier (2003) assessed stress-related growth in undergraduate students who have experienced a recent romantic relationship break-up. Results showed that overall women
reported higher levels of growth than men, as well as those with the personality attribute of Agreeableness.

Before assessing how these reactions to interpersonal issues affect an individual’s growth, overall experiences with romantic issues needed to be assessed; the first purpose of this study was to compare experiences with romantic problems in American and Japanese undergraduate students.

Experiences may vary depending on attitudes and core beliefs pertaining to romantic love. Simmons, Kolke and Shimizu (2001) assessed attitudes towards romantic love in university students from Germany, Japan and the United States. The results showed that romantic love is a culture specific trait and is not universal. Japanese students valued romantic love less than those of the American and German sample. Based on customs, they feel that romantic love has nothing to do with marriage, and that it can hurt their tradition of family-arranged marriages that occur later in life (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg & Pepler, 2004).

Hypothesis 1: American undergraduate students will report more experiences with romantic relationship problems than Japanese undergraduate students.

Seeing as Japanese individuals may not experience romantic issues as often, suffering a relationship problem may really shake an individual and cause severe psychological stress or may even cause more posttraumatic growth. Chinese traditions pertaining to love says that an individual should date only one person, marry that person, and remain loyal to that person; dating is a process to look for a suitable marital partner (Luo, 2008). Because commitment tends to be the basis of relationship satisfaction (Cheng & Kin NG, 2010), having a relationship fail could be a severe stressor and cause psychological damage.
Hypothesis 2: Japanese undergraduate students will more commonly report romantic relationship problems as their most stressful event than American undergraduate students.

Because experiences with romantic issues could be different depending on the culture of the participant, the reactions to these issues could be different as well. The second purpose of this study is to assess how these experiences with romantic problems will affect an individual’s overall posttraumatic growth. From past studies, it can be seen that relationship dissolutions can have a strong negative impact on an individual. However, because these events are so impactful, growth can be obtained depending on the experience and the factors contributing (Tashiro and Frazier, 2003).

Hypothesis 3: For both the American and Japanese students, those who have experienced a relationship problem will show higher PTG than those with no experience; those who have selected romantic problems as their most stressful will show higher PTG than those of no experience; those who selected romantic problems as their most stressful will show higher PTG scores than those who have just experienced a relationship problem, but did not report it as their most stressful event.

Methods

Participants

Data was collected from a 2010 sample of Oakland University students (N = 663) and Japanese undergraduate students as well (N = 637). This sample was divided into three conditions: PTG, non-PTG, and control group. For the purpose of this study, only the PTG group was assessed. Having selected this condition, from the full sample, only those who have selected “romantic relationship problems” from the survey were selected for the analyses of this study.
Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for American and Japanese Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>United States (N = 170)</th>
<th>Japan (N = 108)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
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<td>13.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
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<td>3.50</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>45.90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Measures

Posttraumatic Growth Inventory. This is a 21 statement questionnaire that measures the amount of change experienced after a stressful life event. The directions indicate to rate the degree to which this change occurred in relation to the participant’s life as a result of the event. This is a 6 point-likert type scale with the following values: 0 = Not at all, 1 = Very small degree, 2 = Small degree, 3 = Moderate degree, 4 = Great degree and 5 = Very great degree. The PTGI as an overall scale showed strong reliability, with Cronbach’s α = .92 with the current sample of 663 American undergraduate students and 637 Japanese undergraduate students combined.

Stressful Life Events. Each survey includes a list of 13 different stressful life events that a participant can choose from, as well as options stating no events were experienced or the participant cannot remember. Participants were asked to select one or more events that they have
experienced within the last five years and provide a brief description about the event if they felt comfortable disclosing.

Most Stressful Event. From the events experienced, participants were asked to select one event that was the most stressful event. Once indicated, they were also asked to describe details about the event if they felt comfortable.

Results

Hypothesis 1

To assess the differing experiences with romantic relationship problems in Japanese and American undergraduate students, a chi-square test was conducted. In the American sample, 50.40% of participants have reported a romantic relationship problem \( (n = 170) \). In the Japanese sample, 34.80% of participants have reported a romantic relationship problem \( (n = 108) \). Results showed that hypothesis one was supported, indicating that American undergraduate students reported more experiences with romantic relationship problems than Japanese undergraduate students, \( \chi^2 (1) = 17.65, p < .001 \) (Also shown in Figure 1). The effect size was small, phi = .16

![Figure 1. American participants overall reported more experiences than Japanese participants.](image)

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Hypothesis 2

In order to assess the differences in reports of “Romantic relationship problems” as the most stressful event between American and Japanese undergraduate students, a chi-square test was conducted. Within the American sample, 52.60% of participants selected “Romantic relationship problems” as their most stressful life event (N = 56). In the Japanese sample, 49.40% of participants selected “Romantic relationship problems” as their most stressful life event (N = 46). Results showed that hypothesis two was not supported, showing that there was no significant difference in reports of “Romantic relationship problems” as the most stressful life event, $\chi^2 (1) = .55, n.s$. The effect size was extremely small, phi = .03 showing no significance. Based on the odds ratio, the odds of American students reporting romantic problems as the most stressful event was 1.18 times higher than Japanese students.

Hypothesis 3

Seeing that American and Japanese undergraduate students have differing experiences with romantic relationship problems, further assessment was followed to see how these experiences affected overall growth. Two separate one way ANOVAs for each nation (United States and Japan) were conducted to assess how the growth differed in those who have not experienced a romantic problem, those who have experienced a romantic problem, and those who have reported a romantic problem as their most stressful event.

For the American sample, significant group differences were found, showing that those who have reported “Romantic relationship problems” as their most stressful event showed the highest levels of PTG ($M = 69.88$), $F(2, 308) = 8.71, p < .001$. When assessing the post hoc comparisons, results showed that hypothesis three was partially supported, those who have reported “Romantic relationship problems” as their most stressful life event reported
significantly higher PTG than those who have experienced romantic problems but did not report it as their most stressful event ($p < .001$) and showed significantly higher PTG scores compared to those who have no experience at all with romantic relationship problems ($p < .05$) (shown in Figure 2).

For the Japanese sample, significant group differences were found, showing that those who experienced romantic relationship problems showed the highest levels of PTG ($M = 50.32$), $F(2, 254) = 4.85, p < .01$. When assessing the post hoc comparisons, results showed that hypothesis three was partially supported, those who have experienced a romantic relationship problem but did not report it as their most stressful life event significantly reported higher PTG than those who have no experience with romantic problems ($p < .05$) (shown in Figure 2).

![Figure 2](image.jpg)

*Figure 2*. Overall those who reported romantic problems as the most stressful event who are from the United States experienced the highest growth.

**Discussion**

The results showed that American and Japanese undergraduate students had different experiences with romantic relationship problems; American students overall reported more experiences with romantic problems than Japanese students. Results also showed that there were no significant differences in reports of romantic relationship problems as the most stressful event
between American and Japanese students; participants almost equally reported romantic problems as their most stressful event. After assessing these experiences, overall PTG was assessed between those who have experienced a romantic problem, those who have not, and those who have reported romantic problems as the most stressful life event. In the American sample, those who have reported “Romantic relationship problems” as their most stressful life event reported significantly higher PTG scores than those who have no experience as well as those who have just experienced a romantic problem, but did not report it as the most stressful event. In the Japanese sample, those who have experienced a romantic relationship problem but did not report it as the most stressful event reported significantly higher PTG scores than those who have not experienced a romantic problem.

From these results, it can be seen that even in modern day, traditional customs are still followed which dominate an individual’s love life based on culture. Past studies have shown that Japanese individuals do not value romantic love, and usually do not experience interpersonal relationships until later in life, which coincides with the result of American students having more experiences with romantic problems than Japanese students. Also, customs enhance an idea of strong commitment, which could be a predictor of severe psychological distress experienced as a result of a failed relationship.

Because American students reported more experiences with romantic problems, it was predicted that because they have more experiences, the event of romantic problems would be more stressful to Japanese students due to fewer experiences. Results showed that both American and Japanese students reported similar experiences; no significant differences in the most stressful life event reported showed. This could be due to even though they are different cultures; both parties agree that romantic relationship problems can be severely stressful.
Past studies have shown that romantic problems can cause severe psychological and physical reactions in an individual. Because relationship problems can cause severe side effects, high PTG could come from this. Results showed just this; participants overall who have reported an experience with a romantic relationship problem reported higher PTG scores than those who have not experienced a romantic problem.

A major limitation in this study was the age factor, especially for the Japanese sample. Because previous studies have shown that Japanese individuals do not experience romantic relationships until later in life, this could have affected the results due to a young sample was used. An older sample could show that Japanese individuals have just as many experiences with romantic issues as American individuals.

**Future Directions and Implications**

Future researchers can focus their efforts on further assessing PTG after experiencing a romantic relationship problem. A future direction could involve assessing those who have only reported romantic relationship problems as a stressful event, hence making that their most stressful event, and compare their PTG score to those who have selected multiple stressful events, but still selected romantic relationship problems as their most stressful. Those who have reported multiple events but still selected romantic problems could experience more PTG due to the event may have caused serious psychological distress. Another future direction could focus on how the reason for the romantic relationship problem affects PTG. Those who were broken up with or were cheated on could experience higher PTG than those who ended the relationship or are just experiencing fighting with their significant other. Future research could assign subcategories to the event of romantic relationship problem to assess the reason for the problem.
From this, PTG can be assessed to differentiate if more growth is experienced depending on the relationship problem.

Clinicians can use these findings to provide intervention programs to those who have experienced or are experiencing romantic relationship problems. Because romantic problems can cause severe psychological stress, programs can be created for emotional support through the relationship issue. Clinicians can also provide information about possible benefits that can be experienced after a romantic problem such as posttraumatic growth, helping clients see that not every issue has to have a negative outcome.
References


