Southern Illinois University Carbondale **OpenSIUC**

Honors Theses

University Honors Program

5-2004

Word Use in Disclosure of Traumatic Events and Subjective Well-Being

Jessica Loesch

Follow this and additional works at: http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/uhp_theses

Recommended Citation

Loesch, Jessica, "Word Use in Disclosure of Traumatic Events and Subjective Well-Being" (2004). Honors Theses. Paper 292.

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the University Honors Program at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact opensiuc@lib.siu.edu.

Word Use in Disclosure of Traumatic Events and Subjective Well-Being

Jessica Loesch

Word Use in Disclosure of Traumatic Events and Subjective Well-Being Jessica Loesch

An innovative paradigm is emerging that aims at relinquishing the negative outlook that has been manifested through modern psychology's reluctance to focus on that which brings fullness, beauty, and meaning to life. This emerging worldview has been termed positive psychology. This model wishes to add a dimension of psychology that not only attempts to fix what is wrong, by emphasizing psychopathology, but strives to bring well-being in all aspects to a higher level. It is posited that such an overwhelming emphasis on attending to the deficiencies in humans in psychology can bring us only to par, disregarding the human potential for virtue, love, and compassion.

One major tenet in this optimistic view of studying human nature is subjective well-being, which can be defined as "a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life" (Diener 2002). More commonly deemed happiness, subjective well-being has been of great interest to philosophers, poets, and religious figures in various cultures and has what one might consider a timeless or universal implication. However, until recently there has been little research or empirical measures addressing this theme.

The systematic study of well-being didn't begin, for the most part until the mid1980's, and since then the field has been expanding rapidly. One theory for this interest
in happiness is that a next step in the evolution of man is coming to be. People no
longer have to struggle so much for survival, there is a level of health and material
abundance which allows for people to rather strive for satisfaction, contentment, and joy
in a "post- materialistic" worldview.

In an attempt to systematically study individual differences which contribute to differing levels of happiness and the regulatory processes inherent, some researchers look to narrative accounts that participants produce concerning various emotion-laden topics. It is posited that self-disclosure initiates a process of emotional regulation and that through careful analysis of text samples, cognitive and affective changes can be mapped. By noting who has increases in psychological and physical health from baseline due to their expressive writing, experimenters can begin to make educated guesses as to what differences in writing style indicate improvement.

James W. Pennebaker has made strides in research pertaining to the effects of disclosing trauma on psychological and physical health. By having participants construct narratives about their most traumatic memories, Pennebaker has been able to display the psychological and physical health benefits that can be produced due to putting these recollections of traumatic events into a narrative form as well as the apparent cognitive processes employed by the writers that are conducive to overcoming

distressing thoughts and emotions that had previously been inhibited.

Previously, the theory underlying this writing paradigm was that suppressing or inhibiting thoughts and emotions is a taxing physiological process that impairs the functioning of the mind and body. This stress contributes not only to psychological distress, but also various health problems. This idea has been supported by studies showing that following disclosure, there are improvements in immune system functioning (Petrie, Booth, & Pennebaker, 1998) as well as reductions in blood pressure, muscle tension, and skin conductance (Pennebaker, 1989).

In addition, it is currently posited that expressing painful life events verbally is necessary in order to understand and give meaning to those events. It is believed that disclosure allows writers to put a cognitive structure on events. This structuring promotes an integration of thoughts and feelings of the experience into a more healthy cognitive reorganization (Lutgendorf & Antoni, 1999). This reorganization may allow for a new, less threatening perspective of the event and may allow for closure once an individual can interpret cause-and-effect implications and understand why the event has occurred (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2002).

In order to account for the cognitive processes at work in constructing a narrative, Pennebaker (1999) has introduced a program for computerized analysis of words called the Linguistic Analysis and Word Count (LIWC). This program groups

words into over 70 categories, the most relevant being pronouns in their various tenses, positive and negative emotion words, and cognitive words. The emergence of these words and the frequency with which they are used can be important marker variables.

Pronoun use can be one of these important marker variables. Stirman and Pennebaker (2000) conducted a study that analyzed the 300 poems of both suicidal and nonsuicidal poets to determine if there are linguistic differences and whether or not these differences change over the lifespan. In consistence with a social integration theory of suicide (Durkheim), they found that over time suicidal poets used more first-person and less second-person pronouns. This suggests that suicidal individuals become preoccupied with the self and detached from others.

The use of positive-emotion words (happy, laugh) and negative-emotion words (sad, angry) were found to correlate with adaptive and maladaptive bereavement in a study by Pennebaker, Mayne, and Francis (1997). This study did a post hoc analysis of data from college students, prisoners, and professionals recently laid off from their jobs. They found that as the rate of positive-emotion words went up, health improved, which might be expected. Interestingly, both high and low occurrences of negative-emotion words predicted continuing health problems, while a moderate amount was conducive to health following the studies. It is believed that the reason that a moderate amount of emotion words in a narrative account would be conducive to well being is that in order for disclosure to be beneficial, an intermediate amount of emotional arousal is optimal.

Few emotion words might indicate a lack of arousal, whereas a great deal of them would suggest an overly emotionally aroused individual.

In the same study, cognitive words were shown to be most predictive of health outcomes. Specifically, the increasing use of causal and insight words (know, realize, because) day to day throughout the study indicated health improvements. This shows that over time, participants were able to make causal links in their experience were previously they had not. Further, participants who started the study with a coherent story did not evidence any health improvements. This goes to show that the process of construction of a fluent story is key to overcoming inhibition (Niederhoffer & Pennebaker 2002).