

## *Collectivized Suffering and Post-Traumatic Growth*

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Cultural psychology research on the ways individuals conceptualize experiences of suffering has largely focused on cross-cultural analyses between groups from vastly different backgrounds and ideologies. Previous cross-cultural approaches differentiate between cultural groups and their ideologically-reinforced interpretations of suffering but lack salient information on how individuals conceptualize and grow from personal suffering contrastingly to their identified group. This study goes beyond previous cultural-psychological studies and takes a multicultural approach to research the intricacies of microcultural groups within the broad culture of the United States by comparing the adverse experiences of minority and majority group members within the diverse culture of the University of Arizona. Understanding the underrepresented individuals' experiences of suffering is needed due to a lack of literature on the psychology of suffering that explores adverse experiences for those outside the majority population (white, middle socioeconomic status, and cisgender). We hypothesized that minority group members would display more post-traumatic growth (PTG) as a result of having more collectivization of suffering present within their narrative writing compared to majority group members. To measure the presence of collectivization and personalization, we utilized a thematic statistical analysis to interpret the personal suffering narratives. Data for this study is sourced from an experiment conducted by Dr. Daniel Sullivan regarding the impact of historical identity consciousness on the collectivization of personal suffering where 81 participants were asked to write about any stressful life event and prompted to consider personalization or collectivization when evaluating their stressful experience. Using two-way ANOVA testing we were unable to reject the null hypothesis; however, through statistical analysis of participant prompt compliance rates, we were able to establish methodological validity of the original study's narrative condition prompt used to ask participants to either collectivize or personalize their suffering. The results of this study have implications to support underrepresented communities by bringing awareness to how collectivized or personalized understandings of suffering can lead to culturally-informed PTG.

*Keywords:* collectivized suffering, post-traumatic growth, multicultural analysis

## Introduction

The study of the psychology of suffering has previously focused on cross-cultural analyses of different cultural groups and the benefits that come from personalizing suffering as a negative experience that develops into an opportunity for self-improvement within the overall life story for majority (white, middle SES, cisgender) group members specifically (Sullivan et al., 2018). However, little to no cultural-psychological research has taken a multicultural approach to analyzing the intricacies of how minority group members interpret their personal suffering and how those interpretations may facilitate positive or negative outcomes individually. Previous cultural-psychological research conducted on minority populations focuses on the ways group members construct individual social identities in direct relation to their group's history of disadvantage and socioeconomic need (Howarth, 2002; Hornsey, 2008). In addition, researchers have observed that minority group members collectively experience historical suffering from the past as present-day minority group members continue to make life decisions based on past traumas (Mohatt et al., 2014; Waldram, 2014). Cross-cultural research on historical trauma and suffering developed an understanding of how minority groups interpret suffering and how marginalized individuals can experience post-traumatic growth (PTG) through coping after stress using a framework that addresses the collective group as opposed to the individual (Ortega-Williams, 2021). These cross-cultural findings form the foundation for analyzing how minority individuals conceptualize important areas of identity in terms of their collective group and experience of historical suffering. With this understanding of how minority individuals are connected, we hypothesize that minority (vs majority) group members will display more PTG as a consequence of more collectivization of suffering present within their narrative.

The purpose of the current study is to analyze the narrativization of suffering through a multicultural approach within the U.S. through a survey to discover how minority (vs majority) group members interpret personal suffering based on their group membership through prompted narrativization. In this study, we analyzed secondary survey data where participants were randomly assigned to interpret their suffering in a personalized or collectivized explanation and were then asked a series of PTG survey questions. The current study presents one experiment that develops the connection between collectivization and PTG specifically for minority group individuals, which is informed heavily by a series of previous studies on culture, social group connections, and disadvantaged history.

## Literature Review

To understand the ways in which minority and majority group members interpret their suffering we must develop a brief conceptual background on different cultural ideologies, social identity construction, and personal awareness of historical oppression of their group. Previous research on the psychology of suffering has brought attention to historically disadvantaged groups having culturally reinforced stories for interpreting adversity (Hammock, 2008; Dunlop, 2021), interpreting suffering differently than the majority (Howarth, 2002; Hornsey, 2008), and having their meaning making processes of present day suffering be impacted by transgenerational historical oppression (Mohatt et al., 2014; Waldram, 2014). Cultural psychology has tended to take a cross-cultural approach to researching new discoveries on ideologically reinforced interpretations of suffering, but there is lacking information on the ways marginalized individuals within diverse cultures conceptualize personal adversity in comparison to the majority population. By taking a multicultural approach to delve into the psychological processing differences between majority and minority group members within diverse societies, this study seeks to illuminate the intricacies of making meaning from adversity supported by previous foundational research findings. The following literature review presents the narrative psychological perspective on

suffering interpretations, the relationship between historical oppression and social identity formation, and the importance of collectivization of suffering for minority group members' PTG.

Studies on the psychology of suffering have previously focused on how cultures guide individuals to interpret experiences of adversity through socially reinforced stories known as "master narratives" (McLean & Syed, 2022; Dunlop, 2021). Master narratives are defined by narrative psychology as the dominant discourse within cultures on the way to conceptualize one's individual experience that is socially constructed and culturally reinforced (McLean & Syed, 2022). Demonstrating the positives of adhering to master narratives, social scientists observe that individuals who analyze self-redemptive narratives of assessing the significance of negative life experiences and articulate the positive personal growth experienced from adversity reported higher levels of psychosocial adaptation, well-being, and life enrichment (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Hammock, 2008). On the other hand, researchers argue that due to the bulk of studied populations identifying as cisgender and white, the results lack salient information on how individuals from marginalized groups are impacted by the imposition of redemptive master narratives (McLean & Syed, 2022; Hammock, 2008). Specifically, researchers in support of increasing diversity in narrative psychology discuss the existence of alternative narratives for individuals who do not align with the identity or life experiences of the dominant culture and instead place more value on connections to others when faced with adversity (McLean & Syed, 2022). According to this view, marginalized individuals in the U.S. who make meaning of their suffering by interpreting it within the context of personal connections with others through a narrative characterized by their life circumstances experience higher levels of life satisfaction and enrichment (McLean & Syed, 2022). At the same time, marginalized individuals tend to feel less satisfied with their lives and have lower levels of well-being which, according to researchers, is in large part due to not being able to fully identify with the self-redemptive narrative of the U.S. (McLean & Syed, 2022; Dunlop, 2021). Results on the positive and negative implications of master narratives informed the present study by developing the ways minority individuals narrativize personal suffering and generated an in-depth analysis of how minority individuals in the U.S. can facilitate growth through alternative narratives of suffering in comparison to majority individuals.

Establishing the master and alternative narratives utilized by majority and minority group members respectively opens discussion for why these differences in suffering interpretations arise. Prior research shows that minority group members interpret personal suffering in reference to historical disadvantages that shaped their group's identity through the collective social identity built from oppression (Howarth, 2002; Taylor et al., 2019). Social identities are understood through social psychological theory to be the unique qualities of an individual's self-concept that are derived from their personal association with social group memberships (Hornsey, 2008). By delving deeper into social identity, these previous studies found that the majority of populations are often characterized by a sense of personal agency to decide which social group they identify with most (Howarth, 2002; Hornsey, 2008). This is a decision that is often not available to minority individuals due to power structures set in place and the way history impacts and increases the intertwining of personal and social group identities (Howarth, 2002; Gómez et al., 2011). These studies provide foundational guidance on how minority group members, in comparison to majority group members, formulate their understanding of the self as being influenced by historical and continuous oppression, increasing minority group member identity fusion with their social group identity (Gómez et al., 2011; Bonam et al., 2019). This research interests me as it details how minority individuals formulate their social identity in terms of those around them thereby developing the concept that minority group members would interpret their suffering similarly to those whom they are connected to.

With the development of group and individual identity being

rooted in historical knowledge and awareness, research into historical trauma provides a deeper understanding of how minority group members refer to their groups' historical experiences of oppression when interpreting personal present-day adversity.

Research on historical trauma defines the concept as a complex collective oppressive or discriminatory experience that spans multiple generations of people who have identities or circumstances in common (Mohatt et al., 2014; Waldram, 2014). The utilization of the previous historical narrative that characterizes minority group members is known as the collectivization of suffering where individuals see their personal suffering as being partially rooted in the history of disadvantage for their group (Mohatt et al., 2014). The importance of collectivization of suffering for minority individuals specifically is that it allows for group members to make meaning of their suffering in reference to a larger historical injustice as well as provide solace in the face of future suffering for those in similar circumstances (Adler et al., 2016; McLean & Syed, 2022). By interpreting individual suffering in terms of a larger issue, coping is made more manageable because the blame is shifted from the individual to the collective, which can foster PTG (Adler et al., 2016; Ortega-Williams et al., 2021). Developing an appreciation for the types of interpretations of suffering that facilitate growth from traumatic experiences allows the present study to provide finer detail of the positive outcomes associated with minority group members collectivizing their suffering.

Each of the studies reviewed reveals theoretical and concrete understandings of where the psychology of suffering has developed cross-cultural understandings, group-dependent interpretations of adversity, as well as the gaps in research on the individual experiences of suffering conceptualization within minority groups. Within cultural psychology, generalizations of trends occur among cross-cultural analyses, but larger steps need to be made in developing an in-depth analysis of minority group member experiences. The previous cross-cultural research demonstrated the complexity of culturally dependent master narratives for suffering interpretations (Hammock, 2008; Dunlop, 2021), elaborated on the ways historically disadvantaged group members conceptualize suffering based on past oppression (Howarth, 2002; Hornsey, 2008), and further analyzed the impact of continuous historical trauma on the PTG of minority group members (Mohatt et al., 2014; Waldram, 2014). With a greater understanding of the cross-cultural analyses, a multicultural approach needs to be implemented to further an understanding of how minority group members narrativize and conceptualize their identity in terms of the collective and can develop greater PTG through these processes to increase overall well-being.

## Methods

**Overview.** This study is part of a larger set of studies conducted with a multicultural-psychological perspective on how people from different (majority vs. minority) group backgrounds within the diverse culture of the United States think about suffering. This smaller study was an exploratory project to establish methodological validity for the last of the four studies (Sullivan et al., 2023), previously conducted on the measurement of the presence of collectivization and personalization within participant narratives. The current smaller project utilizes participant and survey data from the previous studies to employ a multicultural psychological lens to analyze how PTG levels interacted with the presence of personalization and collectivization within the suffering narratives dependent upon group status. Methods for participant data collection were reviewed for relevancy and provided below to allow for a fully informed analysis of the results. The relevant variables were identified depending on their significance for analyzing demographics and group status in reference to responses to the suffering narrative prompts, PTG items, and the formation of the project-specific coding scheme.

**Demographics.** 83 participants from the undergraduate student population of the University of Arizona (age:  $M = 18.50$  years; 66.7% female, 30.9% male, 2.5% transgender) completed a survey in exchange for course credit. Prior to analyses, two participants with substantial missing data were removed leaving 81 valid participant responses. Participants indicated their race/ethnicity with the following response options: White/Caucasian (58%); Black/African-American (6.2%); Native American/American Indian or Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander/Alaska Native (6.2%); Hispanic/Latinx (24.7%); Asian American/Asian (8.6%). Participants indicated their socioeconomic status (SES) with the MacArthur ladder measure by rating their subjective ranking in society relative to other people on a scale of 1 = *worse off in society, least money, worst jobs* to 10 = *best off in society, most wealth, most education, best jobs (subjective social status)*;  $M = 6.19$ ,  $SD = 1.58$ ).

**Group Status: Majority vs. Minority.** After completing demographics, participants were prompted to "Think about a social group that is an important part of your identity... This could be your racial/ethnic group, a political group you belong to, a religious group/denomination, or any other community or social group." Participants typed the name of the group, which was later textually inserted into relevant survey tasks and items. They were then asked to respond "Yes" or "No" to the question: "Do you consider this social group to be a minority group in this society (the United States), meaning a group that has experienced historical or ongoing discrimination, persecution, or disadvantage?" Based on this question, participants were assigned majority (50.6%) or minority (49.4%) group status.

**Suffering Manipulation.** Participants were then asked to write "about a time in the past few years when you experienced a great deal of stress and suffering." Participants then rated the severity of the event they wrote about on a scale of 1 = One of the least stressful things that has happened to me to 7 = The most stressful thing that has ever happened to me ( $M = 6.00$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ).

After all participants completed the suffering manipulation prompt detailed above, they were then randomly assigned to complete either a personalized suffering or collectivized suffering prompt. Participants in the personalized suffering narrative condition were instructed to:

Think about how this stressful event fits in with the broader story of your life. In particular, think about how things were before this event, and whether or not this event caused you to see the world differently. Please take a few moments to write about how this event impacted your life's story and the extent to which you changed as a person because of this event.

By contrast, participants in the collectivized suffering narrative condition responded to the prompt:

*Think about how stressful events like this often happen to people like you. In particular, think about the social group you belong to which you named earlier. Please take a few moments to write about how this kind of event often happens to people in your group, and whether you think people in your group could take action to stop such stressful events from happening so much in the future.*

Examples of the kinds of events participants wrote about in these conditions are available in Appendix A.

**PTG.** Participants then completed a validated measure related to coping with potential traumatic stress. They were asked to complete the 10-item PTG Inventory (PTGI; Cann et al., 2010;  $\alpha = .81$ ), with respect to the stressful event they had written about. Participants responded using the original metrics of the PTGI-validated scale.

**Presence of Collectivization and Personalization.** To code the presence of collectivization and personalization within the suffering manipulation prompts, a coding scheme was developed with

theoretical and applied guidance from Thomas (2006) on taking an inductive approach to identifying themes to code within qualitative data. Personalization was defined and operationalized as “interpreting personal suffering as a part of their individual life story in reference to how it impacts their self-concept and how they see the world.” Collectivization was defined and operationalized as “interpreting personal suffering as being partially rooted in the history of disadvantage for their group/community.” The presence of personalization and collectivization were both rated on a scale of 1 = *Not present* to 3 = *Very present*.

Two coders conducted a pilot test of the coding scheme on 10 randomly organized suffering narratives and had an 80% agreement rate, which was deemed high enough according to Krippendorff’s alpha standards for interrater reliability to proceed to coding the remaining 71 randomized narratives after resolving coding disagreements. After the coding of all 81 entries was completed, interrater reliability was measured by correlating the scores given by two coders for each category (collectivization  $r = 0.79$ ; personalization  $r = 0.84$ ). Due to both correlations meeting the universal cutoff for reliability, interrater reliability was established for the suffering narrative coding scheme. After this, a final set of coding decisions was assembled using the coding scheme and comparing both sets of scores to utilize during data analysis. The full suffering narratives coding scheme with examples is available in Appendix B.

## Results

**Collectivization and personalization scores.** To perform the necessary parametric tests, we coded the secondary suffering narrative data for the presence of collectivization and personalization represented by collectivization and personalization scores. We utilized the coding scheme described in methods to score the narratives from 1 = *Not present*, to 2 = *Somewhat present*, to 3 = *Very present* for collectivization and personalization separately (collectivization:  $M = 1.77$ ,  $SD = .78$ ; personalization:  $M = 2.66$ ,  $SD = .58$ ).

**Collectivization Score and PTG.** After the collectivization and personalization scores were coded for, we employed a two-way ANOVA to test our main hypothesis. Contrary to the hypothesis, no significant interaction between collectivization score and group status on PTG was found through the ANOVA analysis. The  $F$ -value was .586 with a  $p$ -value of .446, indicating that there was no significant difference on PTG levels influenced by either collectivization score or group status.

**Group Status and Suffering Narrative Prompt Compliance.** After testing the hypothesis, we conducted chi-square tests on participant compliance with the suffering narrative prompts to establish methodological validity. We first needed to adhere to the binary categorical requirements of chi-squares, by reducing the collectivization and personalization scores from 1-3 down to 0 = *Did not comply* to 1 = *Complied*. Table 1 illustrates the binary results for collectivization condition compliance based on group status. Table 2 displays the binary results for personalization condition compliance based on group status.

**Table 1.** Binary collectivization scores of minority/majority-identified participants

	Majority-identified	Minority-identified	Total
0-Did not comply	34	22	56
1-Complied	7	18	25
Total	41	40	81

**Table 2.** Binary personalization scores of minority/majority-identified participants

	Majority-identified	Minority-identified	Total
0-Did not comply	17	26	56
1-Complied	24	14	25
Total	41	40	81

After consolidating the collectivization and personalization scores we compared group status to suffering narrative condition compliance using chi-square tests. After the chi-square tests were conducted, we converted the results into percentages to analyze the compliance rate to the respective suffering narrative prompts based on group status. The chi-square results converted to percentages are represented in Table 3 to establish methodological validity through further qualitative and quantitative analysis.

**Table 3.** Percentage of minority/majority-identified participants who complied with the prompt

	Majority-Identified	Minority-Identified
Collectivization Prompt	38%	72%
Personalization Prompt	104%	93%

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to take a multicultural approach to analyze how minority and majority group members interpret personal suffering differently through prompted suffering narrative writing. The ANOVA statistical results demonstrated an insignificant interaction, meaning we were unable to reject the null hypothesis of collectivization score and group status influencing PTG levels. The insignificant interaction between the presence of collectivization and group status on PTG levels has pertinent implications for the previous studies which the secondary survey data was sourced from. In the original study, a significant interaction effect was observed between the experimental suffering narrative condition and group status on PTG,  $F(1, 77) = 5.19$ ,  $p = .03$ , partial- $\eta^2 = .06$ . The quantitative original study did not consider the qualitative data analysis of the suffering narratives themselves and assumed the presence of collectivization and personalization based on participant condition. However, through further review of the qualitative data analysis, we could not corroborate the significant interaction effect that was originally found.

We theorize there could have been a methodological error within the coding scheme we developed that led to our results. We only coded the randomized suffering narrative responses as opposed to coding both the primary stressful narrative response and the narrative condition of participants. Separating the two aspects of participant responses made it difficult to detect the type of suffering participants experienced and its relation to their minority or group membership, especially for the collectivization condition. A solution for this problem will be to create a more detailed and sensitive coding scheme with a greater scoring range in order to provide clear parameters for a more thorough and valid qualitative analysis.

Simultaneously, we theorize the lack of result corroboration to the original study could be due to a Type I error within the quantitative study. It is possible that the original study’s quantitative results were simply incorrect and the interaction between suffering narrative condition and group status on PTG is a spurious effect. This would indicate why this smaller study with narrative coding does not

reaffirm the previous significant findings. We plan on replicating this study with a larger sample size to discover whether a Type I error has occurred by assessing a null effect through replication. Although we believe this to be less likely than a methodological error occurring within the coding scheme, these results offer insight into the complexity that comes with researching the qualitative aspects of the idiosyncratic experiences of suffering for minority and majority group members.

Through our chi-square testing, we were able to establish methodological validity for the suffering narrative prompts from the previously conducted experiment via participant compliance percentages. Participants, regardless of condition, either complied with the prompt or expressed misunderstanding of what was being asked. 3 out of 81 participants answered their assigned prompt while also fulfilling the requirements of the opposing condition despite never being asked or presented with information regarding the opposing prompt, therefore fulfilling presence codes for both collectivization and personalization. Due to this double completion phenomenon, the percentage of compliance for majority-identified group members completing the personalization prompt surpassed 100% by a small margin. These statistical findings demonstrate that the prompts were able to convey what was being asked and participants were able to understand the requirements, even with expressed difficulty qualifying their suffering experience.

Research elaborating on the differences between majority and minority groups within the diverse culture of the United States provides a unique perspective to the field of cultural psychology that has previously only focused on broad cross-cultural analyses. We go beyond these studies by parsing through differences in suffering contemplations between microcultural groups under the context of an overarching heterogeneous culture, so researchers can be better equipped to provide culturally informed support resources reflecting collectivized or personalized understandings of suffering.

Specifically, our research into how PTG levels are impacted by culture through suffering interpretations and group status provides stepping-stones for society to curate culturally informed resources for facilitating greater well-being for minority group members and positive psychosocial adaptation following stressful life events. The current study has implications far beyond understanding how different groups within the University of Arizona contemplate suffering as a whole and has the possibility to inform PTG resources for underrepresented group members throughout the United States in the future.

## Appendix A

### Examples of Suffering Narratives Written by Participants

#### Personalized Suffering Narrative | Majority Group Member:

"I feel like this moment impacted my life's story broadly in the sense that I still am dealing with the impacts of the injury itself today and that is pain that I still deal with on an almost daily basis. It also impacted me by making me realize that I was capable of dealing with a lot of my problems on my own but that it ultimately probably caused me more suffering to try to hide it and not talk to anyone at all so as a result of that I tried to be more open with the people closest to me about what was going on in my life. I also feel like I changed as a person in that this situation helped me realize what my priorities in life were regarding the sports I played and my goals education and career wise because for a while during that injury I was concerned that I could have ruined my chances at what career I wanted and that I needed to be more careful with the scenarios I put myself in in my sports."

#### Personalized Suffering Narrative | Minority Group Member:

"In the broader story of my life, this experience is just a small part of it, but will forever influence how I deal with future situations. For starters, it has made me a more cautious and less trusting person. It also has been the reason I have grown and matured so much over the last year. I think I am more capable of being more empathetic and cautious, not just with myself, but for others. The event led me to seek help, and while dealing with it I dealt with other past traumas that I had suppressed from my childhood helping me understand myself better and heal as a whole person."

#### Collectivized Suffering Narrative | Majority Group Member:

"I think a lot of people my age, and I'm sure in my sorority as well struggle with disordered eating. I think if we made it a normal talking subject, and promoted that all foods are good, and that all bodies are perfect less women would have low self-esteem regarding their bodies."

#### Collectivized Suffering Narrative | Minority Group Member:

"Within the LGBTQ+ community, we are constantly ostracized and judged, most especially by religious groups. We are denied rights that we should be allowed to have, such as marriage. We are judged as morally wrong, when we are simply different. I think that if we keep fighting for our rights, fighting for the social acceptance that is starting to spread, it will come in time."

## Appendix B Suffering Narratives Coding Scheme

### Collectivization

Concept	Indicator
Not Present	Expresses no connection between personal suffering and individual self-concept or impact on worldview OR expresses misunderstanding of the prompt
Somewhat Present	Refers to broader group/community experience of suffering with small to no connection between personal suffering and the group/community experience
Very Present	Provides concrete examples of personal suffering and connects them to group/community experience of suffering

### Personalization

Concept	Indicator
Not Present	Expresses no connection between personal suffering and individual self-concept or impact on worldview OR expresses misunderstanding of the prompt
Somewhat Present	Expresses broad connections between personal suffering experience and individual self-concept development or impact on worldview with fewer details
Very Present	Provides concrete connections between personal suffering experience and individual self-concept development and/or impact on worldview

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