The benefits of psychological displacement in diary writing when using different pronouns

Y. T. Seih1*, Y. C. Lin1, C. L. Huang2, C. W. Peng1 and S. P. Huang3

1National Taiwan University, Taipei, Taiwan
2National Taiwan University of Science and Technology, Taipei, Taiwan
3National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan

This study examined a new emotional writing paradigm, that is PDDP. PDDP instructs participants to write diary in first-person pronoun first, and then narrate the same event from a different perspective using second-person pronoun. Finally, the participants write it again with third-person pronoun from yet another perspective. These three narrations were to be written in a consecutive sequential order. Results demonstrated that diary writers indeed benefited from features of PDDP. It also showed that highly anxious people received most long-term therapeutic effect from PDDP. We argue that PDDP enacts the needed mechanism to balance psychological distance prolonging and self-disclosure making in emotional writing.

Self-disclosure has been demonstrated to be a key contributing factor for emotional writing to show therapeutic effect (Pennebaker, 1997). On the other hand, Cohn, Mehl, and Pennebaker (2004) also found that prolonged psychological distance, that is using less first-person singular pronouns, provided buffering effect after traumatic experiences. How to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory perspectives in emotional writing? The present study used PDDP (Jin, 2005) to balance the effects of self-disclosure and prolonged psychological distance in emotional writing.

Jin (2005) proposed psychological displacement diary-writing paradigm (PDDP) to systematically manoeuvre psychological distance in diary writing. PDDP instructs the participants to write diary in first-person pronoun first, and then narrate the same event but take a different perspective using second-person pronoun. Finally, the participants write it again with third-person pronoun in another perspective. These three narrations were to be written in a consecutive sequential order. Jin (2005) found diary writers were inclined to self-disclose personal feelings in the first-person pronoun phase. While in the second-person pronoun phase, the diaries looked like inner dialogue among themselves and a corresponding supportive partner. In the third-person pronoun phase, writings were characterized by objective and rational tones. Overall, writing sequentially from...
the first to the third phase resulted in gradual changes in perspectives. These changes demonstrated a shift in psychological distance from one’s experiences to objective evaluation of a specific event, thus this process is called *psychological displacement*.

Based on Jin’s assertion, we argued that PDDP can provide a way to integrate both self-disclosure and psychological distance needed for therapeutic effect. PDDP systematically promotes self-disclosure in the first-person pronoun phase and prolongs psychological distances in the second-person pronoun as well as the third-person pronoun phases. This study was the first to empirically examine the beneficial effects of the PDDP.

**Method**

Participants were 108 volunteers from National Taiwan University. Participants first came to an organizational meeting where detailed instructions were given, and then took the modified version of Fisher’s (2000) *general emotional scales*, measuring four types of emotion: positive emotion, anger, sadness, and anxiety. They then kept diaries for 10 consecutive days in the format of PDDP. Upon completion of the daily diary, they also filled out the life satisfaction scale (LS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) each day. One week after diary writing, participants took the follow-up general emotional scales again. Twenty participants who did not follow through the instructions were excluded.

**Results**

**Short-term effect**

On account of cost, 40 among the 88 participants’ diaries were randomly selected for content analyses. Two trained raters conducted the content coding. The coding items were generated based on theoretical quests of the PDDP so that different items targeted specifically at the corresponding features of each PDDP phase. These features included self-disclosure in the first-person pronoun phase, self-support in the second-person pronoun phase, and objective description in the third-person pronoun phase. The average inter-rater reliability was .62.

Hierarchical linear modelling was employed to analyse the effects of the features on LS. Results showed that self-disclosure significantly predicted LS ($\beta = 0.21$, $df = 39$, $p < .01$) in the first-person pronoun phase, self-support significantly predicted LS ($\beta = 0.12$, $df = 39$, $p = .05$) in the second-person pronoun phase. No significant effect in third-person pronoun phase was found.

**Long-term improvement**

Given the self-supportive functions of PDDP, we proposed that highly anxious people suffering from repression of their feelings (Erskine, Kvavilashvili, & Kornbrot, 2007) would experience more therapeutic improvement in PDDP. Thus, we divided participants into three groups: high ($N = 32$), moderate ($N = 29$), and low anxiety groups ($N = 27$) by the pre-test anxiety level. One-way ANOVA and contrast analyses examined the degree of improvement through PDDP writing period among these three groups.

Comparing high anxiety with the other groups, we found a significant difference on anxiety (means = $-0.33$ vs. $0.20$ and $0.64$, $F_{\text{contrast}(2, -1, -1)} = 11.17$, $p < .01$), and a near-significant effect on anger (means = $-0.34$ vs. $-0.08$ and $0.17$, $F_{\text{contrast}(2, -1, -1)} = 3.68$, $p = .06$).
Discussion
This study demonstrated that diary writers indeed benefited from features of PDDP. It also showed that highly anxious people received most long-term therapeutic effect from PDDP. We believe that it is important for emotional writing to have a designated mechanism to simultaneously avoid one from being entrapped in one’s own emotional experiences and to promote emotional support as well as objective insights. The major attribute of PDDP is that the three consecutive phases using different writing pronouns serves different functions. The first-person pronoun phase promotes emotional disclosure. The second-person pronoun phase stimulates one’s dialogue with oneself in the form of self-support. The third-person pronoun phase actualizes personal emotional experience from an objective and distant position.

To be more exact, in PDDP, self-emotional experiences are directly expressed first, then supported, and finally transformed. These processes are significantly characterized by the procedure, through which, PDDP enacts the needed mechanism to balance psychological distance prolonging and self-disclosure making. Although our argument was partially supported in the current study, PDDP nonetheless is a promising paradigm providing new avenues for theoretical clarifications and practical applications of emotional writing.

Acknowledgements
This research was supported by two grants (NSC-95-2413-H-002-027-MY2 and 95R0064-AH03-05) to the second author.

References

Received 10 July 2007; revised version received 30 September 2007