



## Storying away self-doubt: Can narratives dispel threats to the self?

Lauren E. Jennings, Kate C. McLean\*

Western Washington University, Bellingham, United States

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Available online 21 February 2013

#### Keywords:

Narrative identity  
Self-threat  
Individual differences  
Meaning-making

### ABSTRACT

Personal narratives play an important role in creating a stable sense of self. This study used an experimental design to explore the utility of narrative, in comparison to other mechanisms, (e.g., self-affirmation, distraction), for coping with self-concept threat. Participants ( $N = 331$ ) received false physiological feedback suggesting they were prejudiced and completed one of five repair techniques, as well as pre-study, post-threat, and post-repair measures of affect and self-concept. General high-point narratives and affirmation statements tended to produce greater repair than tolerance-specific narratives and affirmation statements. However, individual differences, including meaning-making, appear to modestly impact the amount of repair in tolerance narratives. Results are discussed in terms of when and how narratives maintain personal meaning in the face of threat.

© 2013 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

Developing and maintaining a stable sense of self is a challenging task, as people sometimes encounter situations that create a contradiction between their current thoughts and behaviors and their established understanding of who they are. Thus, having some anchor that moors a person to his or her self understanding, even when faced with contradictory evidence, would be helpful for navigating life's unfolding of self-relevant feedback. One possible mechanism for maintaining a stable sense of self is the storying of personal experience. Researchers who study narratives suggest that stories about the past are often constructed in ways that help to promote stability in how people think about themselves (e.g., Bluck, Alea, Habermas, & Rubin, 2005; Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007). However, no research to date has explored whether this stability function is useful in refuting feedback about the self which challenges a person's self-concept, and this was the focus of the present study.

### 2. Narratives as functional tools

Study of narrative identity and autobiographical memory has clearly established that reflection on the past is rarely, if ever, just idle reminiscence (e.g., Bluck, 2003). Rather, personal narratives can be viewed as tools that people employ as a strategic response to the demands of a given context. While the personal past has

many uses, Bluck et al. (2005) suggest that two particularly important functions of autobiographical memories and stories include helping people understand who they are and informing and guiding thoughts and behaviors.

Research on narrative identity supports the idea that people use stories to develop a stable sense of self (e.g., McLean, 2008; McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007; Pasupathi et al., 2007), and much of this research on the relationship between narratives and identity has focused on the role played by autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Researchers have repeatedly demonstrated an association between autobiographical reasoning in personal stories and the development of a coherent and mature identity (e.g., Bauer, McAdams, & Sakaeda, 2005; McLean, 2005; McLean & Pratt, 2006). For example, Pasupathi et al. (2007) have demonstrated how narratives allow people to draw connections between the self and previous events in order to demonstrate enduring traits or articulate processes of change. Thus, narratives about the past provide a venue for integrating experiences into a consistent sense of self across time and context.

Researchers have also demonstrated that stories from the personal past act as a guide for present behaviors and emotions. For example, memories of past mistakes or failures often become touchstones used to motivate future attempts at excellence or success (Pillimer, 2003), and memories of past experiences can play an important role in guiding subsequent decisions (Wirtz, Kruger, Scollon, & Diener, 2003). In addition, reflection on the past can be useful in regulating emotion. For example, many researchers have documented improvements in psychological health subsequent to writing emotion-laden accounts of traumatic personal experiences (see Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999 for a review). Thus,

\* Corresponding author. Address: Western Washington University, Department of Psychology, MS 9172, 516 High Street, Bellingham, WA 98225, United States.

E-mail address: [Kate.McLean@wwu.edu](mailto:Kate.McLean@wwu.edu) (K.C. McLean).

revisiting the past plays an important role in directing a person's present emotions and behaviors.

In many respects, these two functions of reflection on the past – self and directive – operate independent of one another. However, solely conceptualizing them as unique functions may fail to do justice to all of the ways in which personal narratives serve as context-specific tools (McLean, 2005). Indeed, one such melding of the self and directive functions of narratives is that stories, and the self-stability they afford, may be an informative reference point when encountering discrepant feedback regarding the self (Bluck et al., 2005). When people's identities are threatened with feedback that runs counter to their idea of who they are, stories that demonstrate self-stability may be an effective tool for diffusing this threat, as these might help them distinguish between what is enduring and what is situational.

### 3. Identity management via personal narratives

One model for how stories about the past may help refute self-contradictory feedback is an application of *Burke's Identity Control Theory* (1991) to narrative identity. Burke's theory pertains to how a person regulates his or her identity standards. Applying Burke's theory to a narrative context might unfold in the following manner: People "collect" stories about themselves that help explain who they are. As they move from situation to situation, they are evaluating the ways in which their environment relates to their self-concept. As people tend to seek out self-verifying situations (Swann, 2005), they should frequently encounter situations that are consistent with how they conceptualize and story themselves. However, people cannot always control their environment, experiences, or social feedback, thus opening the door to episodes of self-concept threat. In these situations, people must decide how to manage this threat. On one hand, they may dismiss the situation as irrelevant, and refuse to let it inform their self-concept (e.g., King & Raspin, 2004; Pasupathi et al., 2007). However, if they are unable to deny that the situation has some bearing on who they are, then people will attempt to demonstrate that the source of the discord is the situation and not their self-concept (Baumeister, Stilman, & Wotman, 1990). There are many ways to 'blame the situation'; however, using self stories as counter examples would be particularly strategic, as it would show that in other situations, one's self-concept was verified.

Studies of motivated autobiographical recall suggest that people do strategically recruit personal narratives to deflect challenges to their self-esteem or self-concept. For instance, by manipulating the social desirability of a trait, researchers have shown that people tell different stories about their pasts in order to demonstrate or refute their possession of that characteristic (Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990). Similarly, in a study in which researchers challenged the accuracy of an important trait, people were able to draw on past experiences for counterexamples to dismiss the undesirable self-discrepancy (Eisenstadt & Leippe, 1994). In contrast, participants who received feedback on unimportant traits were much more likely to believe the discrepant information, as they had less counter evidence to refute the feedback (see also Eisenstadt, Hicks, McIntyre, Rivers, & Cahill, 2006; Eisenstadt, Leippe, & Rivers, 2002). Thus it would seem that reflection on important aspects of the personal past is an ideal tool for resolving discrepancies between a person's self-concept and the contradictory feedback he or she receives.

While narratives appear to have characteristics that make them well-suited to self-concept repair, there are important indi-

vidual differences in story construction (McAdams, 2001). Most relevant to the present study, people differ in the extent to which they engage in autobiographical reasoning (e.g., McLean, 2005; Pasupathi et al., 2007; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996) and in how they frame emotional events (e.g., McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Additionally, researchers have demonstrated that individual differences in both the kinds of autobiographical reasoning that people utilize and the content of the personal stories they construct are associated with differences in various well-being outcome measures (e.g., Bauer, McAdams, & Pals, 2008; McAdams et al., 2001; McLean & Breen, 2009). Thus, any study of the effectiveness of stories in dispelling threats to a person's self-concept should also consider how narrative quality moderates the relationship between narrative and repair.

### 4. Current study

It seems plausible that stories may help guide an individual's response to a situation which threatens his or her current identity, and research into the motivations for storying the past support this idea. However, no studies to date have experimentally tested if stories are capable of dispelling the negative emotion and self-doubt that accompanies self-discrepant information. The current study was designed to present participants with self-discrepant feedback and to offer them an opportunity to repair that discrepancy via narrative and several other strategies. Additionally, the current study also sought to explore how differences in narrative quality affect the extent to which they serve as an effective repair.

#### 4.1. Self-concept threat

An accurate comparison of the effectiveness of personal narratives to other strategies would be confounded if all participants did not undergo a manipulation of the same aspect of their self-concept. Given the use of a sample of undergraduates at a relatively liberal institution, we chose to threaten participants with the perception that they are prejudiced. Because increases in education (Hello, Scheepers, & Slegers, 2006) and a liberal political orientation (Jost, Glaser, Kruglanski, & Sulloway, 2003) are associated with beliefs in equality, the perception of being prejudiced was expected to be at least mildly threatening to most participants. Further, because researchers have shown that discrepant feedback from a low-credibility source is easy to dismiss (Eisenstadt & Leippe, 1994), we chose a manipulation that is difficult to discount – one's own physiological response. Participants were given false physiological feedback in response to pictures of African Americans and obese people in such a way that suggests that the participants are unable to inhibit negative arousal when viewing these images. This methodology has been used by other researchers who have found it to be a credible manipulation of a person's perception of their own prejudice (Dutton & Lake, 1973; Monteith, Ashburn-Nardo, Voils, & Czopp, 2002). Finally, it is important to note that the choice of threatening a person's concept as a tolerant person blurs the line between a person's desire to view himself accurately and the desire to view himself positively (Leary, 2007), as being non-prejudiced is a socially desirable trait to possess. Thus, the repair conditions and outcome variables were designed to consider how effective narratives are in managing both of these aspects of this threat to the self.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10471119>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10471119>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)