



The rises and falls of romance: Considering redemption, contamination, and affective tone in the narrative construction of love lives



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ABSTRACT

We applied a narrative identity approach to the study of love lives. Participants were prompted to outline the 'chapters' of their love lives, describe a series of key scenes from this domain (high points, low points), and complete a measure of romantic attachment tendencies. Chapters and key scenes were coded for redemption, contamination, and affective tone. Life chapters became less contaminated and more emotionally positive over time. Furthermore, positive affective tone in participants' chapters and scenes corresponded with secure attachment tendencies. Thus, there exists a tendency to perceive one's love life as increasingly positive over time (or chapters), and the love life narrative identity of securely attached individuals is largely defined by positive tone.

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1. Introduction

Over the last several decades, an increasingly vocal chorus of scholars has come to champion the notion that life is commonly understood in story-like, or narrative, terms (McAdams, 2013; Singer, 2004). Such self-understanding plateaus in the construction of a life story, or narrative identity, in which the narrator draws causal links between his or her past, present, and future. The result is a psychological resource that provides the narrator with a sense of meaning, purpose, and direction (McAdams, 2013).

1.1. Assessing narrative identity

An array of assessment procedures has been used to measure aspects of narrative identity (see McCoy & Dunlop, 2016). Arguably the most exhaustive procedure on the market is McAdams' (2008) Life Story Interview (LSI). In this semi-structured interview, a participant is first instructed to think about his or her life as if it were a novel and then briefly offer an overview of the 'chapters' in this story. This portion of the interview is followed by prompts for a series of significant key scenes, such as life high points, low points,

and turning points. Finally, participants are posed a number of ideological, philosophical, and summative questions.

1.2. Quantifying narrative identity

Researchers working with LSI-generated data have most often focused on the analysis of participants' key scenes (Adler et al., 2017). To perform such analyses, key scenes are quantified in terms of a number of nomothetic categories. Recently, Adler, Lodi-Smith, Phillippe, and Houle (2016) offered a typology for organizing these categories. One dimension of this typology, the 'affective dimension,' captures "the emotional quality of a part or whole of a narrative" (p. 157). It has been operationalized primarily through a consideration of redemptive sequences (present when a narrative begins negatively and ends positively), contaminated sequences (present when a narrative begins positively and ends negatively), and affective tone (the overall degree of positive, relative to negative, emotional content of the narrative, with higher values indicating greater positive tone, hereafter referred to as 'tone').

In one of the foundational studies exploring these three narrative qualities, McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, and Bowman (2001) noted that the frequency of redemptive key scenes participants generated as well as the overall tone of participants' stories

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corresponded positively with indicators of psychological adjustment (e.g., self-esteem, well-being). The frequency of contaminated key scenes generated by participants, in contrast, related negatively with adjustment. Since this pioneering work, levels of redemption, contamination, and tone in participants' narratives have been linked to a host of additional noteworthy constructs, including health and prosocial behaviors (e.g., Dunlop & Tracy, 2013; Walker & Frimer, 2007).

Narrative identity is meant to reflect individuals' story-based understanding of their lives. Drawing together work on the structure of self (e.g., McConnell, 2011) with narrative approaches to self-understanding (McAdams, 2013). Dunlop (2015, 2017) has argued that narrative identity is best understood as a multi-level, or hierarchical, construct in which one's overall, or *generalized*, narrative identity rests atop a series of more domain-specific, or *contextualized*, identities. As is the case with trait-based models of the self (e.g., McConnell, 2011), there likely exists variability with respect to the domains or contexts relevant to the life in question. That being said, the domains of work and love are at least partially applicable to most if not all individuals functioning within modern Western cultural contexts (Wiggins, 1991). Here, we focus on narrative identity as applied to the romantic domain – that is, love life narrative identity.

1.3. Romancing narrative identity

Several research groups have examined participants' narrative representations of specific (most commonly current) romantic relationships (e.g., Frost, 2013), as well as accounts of certain experiences within the romantic domain, such as breakups (e.g., Blackburn, Brody, & LeFebvre, 2014). The important role stories play in personal and social functioning within the romantic domain has also been emphasized (e.g., Sternberg, 1995).¹ Furthermore, some recent research has examined narrative descriptions of a small number of key scenes from the romantic domain (e.g., love life high points; Dunlop, Hanley, & McCoy, in press). Researchers, however, have yet to set about the instruct of examining individuals' broader love life narrative identities, which include the major life 'chapters' corresponding to this domain, as well as the wide array of key scenes assessed in the LSI.

The above represents an unfortunate oversight for many reasons. Perhaps most poignantly, there is reason to anticipate that the constructs derived from participants' love life narrative identities will correspond with domain-specific indicators of adjustment (e.g., adult romantic attachment tendencies; see Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). This prediction is predicated on the central tenet of the 'bandwidth-fidelity tradeoff' (Roberts & Donahue, 1994), which specifies that the strongest relations between personality characteristics (including the constructs derived from narrative identity) and adjustment are to be expected when the degree of specificity in these constructs is parallel (i.e., similarly context-specific or general).

1.4. The present study

Here, we introduce the Love Life Story Interview (LLSI) in the interest of assessing participants' love life narrative identities. This interview maintains the structure of the LSI, but has been tailored to the romantic domain. In the current project, we focus on the chapters participants recognized as relevant to their love lives, as

well as their narrative descriptions of the six domain-specific key scenes we assessed (described in greater detail below). Participants also completed measures of anxious and avoidant attachment tendencies (Fraley et al., 2000). Chapters and scenes were quantified in terms of redemption, contamination, and tone.

With respect to participants' love life chapters, we were interested in determining: (1) the manner in which the affective quality of love life narrative identity progressed over time, (2) whether the overall redemption, contamination, and tone of these chapters related to participants' attachment tendencies, and (3) whether the slope of these constructs across life chapters corresponded with these attachment tendencies. To our knowledge, the current study is the first to explore potential normative developments in the affective quality of life chapters (drawn from the romantic domain or otherwise). With respect to participants' key scenes, we were interested in determining whether the affective quality of these scenes related to participants' attachment tendencies. Drawing from previous research exploring the affective dimension of narrative identity in relation to psychological functioning (e.g., Dunlop et al., in press; McAdams et al., 2001), we predicted that the redemption and tone in participants' love life narrative identities (as assessed in both chapters and scenes) would correspond negatively with anxious and avoidant attachment tendencies, whereas the contamination in these identities would correspond positively with these tendencies. This work represents the first to study the narrative psychology of love lives by way of the LLSI.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

Participants ($N = 97$) were recruited from the city of Riverside, California to take part in a study exploring "personality and positive psychological functioning." Consistent with previous narrative identity research in which the LSI has been employed (e.g., Walker & Frimer, 2007), we targeted a sample of approximately 100 participants. In exchange for their involvement in this study, each participant received a \$50.00 honorarium. The average age of our sample was 41.97 years ($SD = 9.19$) and 63% ($n = 60$) of our sample was female. 14%, 27%, and 49% of our sample self-identified as African-American, Latino/a, and White/Caucasian, respectively.

After providing informed consent, participants completed the LLSI.² In this interview, participants are first instructed to outline the chapters of their love lives. Next, they are prompted for descriptions of a high point, low point, turning point, positive early memory, negative early memory, and an additional vivid memory, from their love lives. Finally, participants are asked for responses to a series of more ideological prompts not considered in the current study. Responses were subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Following administration of the LLSI, participants completed the 36-item version of the Experiences in Close Relationships – Revised (ECR-R; Fraley et al., 2000). 18 of the items in this measure pertain to anxious tendencies (e.g., "My desire to be very close sometimes scares people away"), while the remaining 18 items pertain to avoidant tendencies (e.g., "I don't feel comfortable opening up to romantic partners"). These items were rated on a seven-point scale ranging from 1 ("Strongly disagree") to 7 ("Strongly agree"). Scores of anxious and avoidant tendencies were subsequently derived ($\alpha_s = 0.93$ and 0.94, respectively).³ The data for this project may be accessed publically from the Open Science Framework (<https://osf.io/mgj75/>).

¹ Although he wrote extensively about 'love as a story,' the majority of Sternberg's (1995) empirical research in this area relied on the administration of a self-report measure to identify the story, or schema, with which participants most aligned, rather than collecting participants' autobiographical narratives about their experiences within the romantic domain.

² A copy of this interview is available at: <https://osf.io/pfj63/2>.

³ A measure of secure attachment may be derived by inverting and averaging scores of anxious and avoidant attachment tendencies (see for example Simpson, Rholes, & Phillips, 1996).

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