



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jarmac

Narrative Identity and Grief Reactions: A Prospective Study of Bereaved Partners

Dorthe Kirkegaard Thomsen*, Marie Lundorff, and Maja O'Connor
Aarhus University, Denmark

Anette Damkier
Odense University Clinic, Denmark

The purpose of the study was to explore relations between narrative identity and reactions to bereavement. Approximately 2–3 months after losing their partner, 161 older participants completed questionnaires measuring grief symptoms, positive affect, and neuroticism. They also described past and future chapters in their life stories and rated chapters on positive and negative emotional tone. Past chapters were coded for whether they were related to the loss of the partner and these loss chapters were coded for positive and negative emotional tone. Future chapters were content coded for positive and negative emotional tone as well as whether the content reflected new roles/activities and continuation of roles/activities. At follow-up (5–6 months later), participants completed questionnaires measuring grief symptoms and positive affect. Individuals with more positive future chapters and future chapters emphasizing continuation of roles and activities experienced less severe grief reactions and more positive affect. Thus, narrative identity may be useful for understanding reactions to bereavement.

General Audience Summary

Individuals who lose a close other may experience prolonged grief. Understanding the psychological processes involved in coping with grief is important to identify individuals in need of help and to develop interventions. Life story chapters are important periods in life stories, which support a coherent understanding of life and a sense of who one is as a person (e.g., “my marriage”). Individuals who have lost their spouse need to give up a planned future with their spouse and reconstruct their future life story chapters. We examined life story chapters, grief, and positive affect in 161 individuals who had lost their spouse to cancer. We found less severe reactions to bereavement among individuals who emphasized positive emotions and continuation of roles in their future life chapters and who thought of the chapter concerned with the loss of their spouse as containing some positive aspects (e.g. “a beautiful conclusion to a good life”). The results suggest that constructing a positive future may be a central task for bereaved individuals. Interventions for individuals suffering from prolonged grief could include a focus on life stories.

Keywords: Grief, Life story chapters, Future thinking, Positive affect, Continuing roles

Author Note

Dorthe Kirkegaard Thomsen, Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences and Center on Autobiographical Memory Research (CON AMORE), Aarhus University, Denmark; Marie Lundorff and Maja O'Connor, Department of Psychology and Behavioural Sciences, Aarhus University, Denmark; Anette Damkier, Department of Mental Health, Odense - University Clinic, Denmark.

We owe much to the participants who shared their life stories and answered questionnaires during a very difficult time in their life. Thanks to the staff at The Palliative Care Team Funen, Odense University Hospital for their help

with recruiting participants, to Nina Coulthard Smith for assistance with the data collection, and to Marie Christoffersen for help with content coding. The study was supported by a grant from the Velux Foundation to the first author (VELUX33266). The first author is affiliated with CON AMORE, which is funded by the Danish National Research Foundation (DNRF89).

* Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dorthe Kirkegaard Thomsen, Department of Psychology, Aarhus University, Bartholins Allé 9, DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark. Contact: dorthet@psy.au.dk

When a close other dies, individuals may experience this as losing a part of themselves, suggesting that identity may play a role in grief reactions (Maccalum & Bryant, 2013; Maercker et al., 2013; Prigerson et al., 2009; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Grief encompasses yearning for and preoccupation with the deceased, and for some individuals grief reactions become persistent: this is referred to as prolonged grief (Lundorff, Holmgren, Farver-Vestergaard, Zachariae, & O'Connor, 2017; Maciejewski, Maercker, Boelen, & Prigerson, 2016; Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Identity encompasses life stories, also termed narrative identity. Life stories refer to temporally, causally, and thematically coherent internalized accounts of important events in the individuals' past, present, and future (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 1996). According to several authors, narrative identity may be important to understanding grief (Baddeley & Singer, 2010; Neimeyer, 2006; Neimeyer, Klass, & Dennis, 2014), but few studies have directly examined this.

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether narrative identity is related to difficulties recovering from loss. Below, we describe narrative identity and develop hypotheses concerning connections between narrative identity and reactions to bereavement.

Narrative Identity

Life stories have been argued to be central to identity because they integrate past, present, and future experiences and provide explanations for who individuals are, how they have become who they are, and what direction their future lives are going (McAdams, 1996). Studies show that when individuals describe their life stories, they spontaneously use temporally extended periods such as marriage as chapters to create an overall structure (McAdams, 2001; Thomsen, 2009). Chapters are rated as more important to identity than memories of circumscribed events and are more closely associated with other aspects of the self (Steiner, Thomsen, & Pillemer, 2017; Thomsen & Pillemer, 2017), indicating that they are central to life stories. While individuals represent both past and future chapters in their life stories (Thomsen, Lind, & Pillemer, 2017), future chapters differ from past chapters because they refer to possibilities rather than actual periods. Still, representation of future events plays an important role in guiding goal pursuit (Szpunar, 2010).

A central feature of life chapters is emotional tone, which varies from happy to pessimistic (McAdams, 1996; Thomsen, Steiner, & Pillemer, 2016). The emotional tone does not just reflect life as it happened; it is a result of selection (e.g., Is this period important to who I am?) and interpretation (e.g., Was this period mostly negative or did it include positive aspects?; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Studies show that individuals who select negative events as central to identity suffer poorer well-being (Berntsen & Rubin, 2006). In addition, a recent review concluded that individuals who described key scenes in their life stories with positive emotional tone experienced greater well-being (Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2016). Similarly, studies have shown that individuals who perceive life chapters as positive report higher

well-being and self-esteem (Steiner et al., 2017; Thomsen et al., 2017).

Narrative Identity and Grief Reactions

Narrative identity may play a role in coping with grief. First, narrative identity is constructed through connections between past, present, and future, and bereaved individuals may experience a major break in life-story continuity because their close other can no longer be a part of their future life (Neimeyer, 2006). Thus, the task that bereaved individuals face is to let go of an anticipated future life story that their close other was a part of and construct a new and meaningful future (see also Crossley, 2000). How much the close other was a part of future chapters and the suddenness of the death may affect the reconstruction of future chapters, but seeing future chapters as containing positive aspects may generally be important for coping with grief. Although not directly concerned with life stories, previous studies support the idea that more positive and less negative cognitions about the future are related to better outcomes among bereaved individuals (Boelen & Huntjens, 2008; Boelen, van den Bout, & van den Hout, 2003; Golden & Dalgleish, 2012). Because the construction of future events is based on representations of past events (D'Argembeau & van der Linden, 2004; Szpunar, 2010), having more positive past life stories may help individuals to reconstruct their new future in a positive way. Hence, we expected that both more positive past chapters and more positive future chapters would be related to better outcomes in bereaved individuals. We included a measure of positive affect in addition to a measure of grief reactions, because experiencing positive affect is a part of recovering from loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

A second way narrative identity may play a role in how bereaved individuals adapt to their loss is through the narration of the loss itself. The loss may be interpreted as only negative, with an emphasis on suffering and failure, or it may be evaluated as also including positive aspects, such as support from family or the deceased finally finding peace. One study showed that participants with complicated grief were less likely to describe self-defining memories of the loss with redemption (a move from negative to positive content) and included more negative affect compared to bereaved participants without complicated grief (Maccalum & Bryant, 2008). Thus, depending on what aspects individuals include in their loss chapters, they may come to represent the loss as more or less positive or negative, which may be related to outcomes, both in terms of less severe grief and more positive affect.

The Present Study

To sum up, we expected that more positive and less negative past and future life story chapters would be associated with better outcomes in bereaved individuals. Focusing on life story chapters concerned with the loss, we expected that more positive and less negative loss chapters would be related to better outcomes. Emotional tone was assessed using both self-report and content coding. In addition, we explored the content of future chapters with a focus on new roles and continuing roles.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/10153253>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/10153253>

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