



## Contextualizing narrative identity: A consideration of assessment settings



Tara P. McCoy\*, William L. Dunlop

Department of Psychology, University of California, Riverside, United States

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 1 June 2016

Revised 18 August 2016

Accepted 20 August 2016

Available online 28 August 2016

#### Keywords:

Life stories

Narrative identity

Key autobiographical scenes

Autobiographical narratives

Assessment contexts

### ABSTRACT

We examined the influence features of assessment contexts exhibited on the content of the key autobiographical scenes often considered by personality psychologists. Participants ( $N = 402$ ) narrated life high points, low points, and turning points within a 2(interviewer; present, absent)  $\times$  2(response format; written, spoken) study design. Narratives were quantified for 15 linguistic (e.g., negative emotion words) and six conceptual (e.g., affective tone) variables. We noted that 93% of linguistic variables and 83% of conceptual variables differed as a function of assessment context in the form of main effects for, and/or interactions between, study variables. The narrative materials commonly assessed by personality psychologists are highly sensitive to features of the contexts in which they are assessed.

© 2016 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

In late adolescence and early adulthood, individuals begin to construct life stories, or narrative identities, which are phenomenological representations of the past, present, and (presumed) future (McAdams, 2008). When researchers are interested in assessing narrative identities they commonly prompt participants for descriptions of key autobiographical scenes, such as life high points, low points, and turning points. These scenes are next quantified in terms of various linguistic categories (e.g., proportion of cognitive words, positive emotion words) via automated computer programs such as the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007), and conceptual categories (e.g., agency, redemption, complexity) via human coders. The resulting scores are then examined in relation to select outcome variables including, but not limited to, psychological adjustment (Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2016) and the recovery from substance abuse (Dunlop & Tracy, 2013).

Autobiographical narratives, including those individuals disclose to social contacts outside of research settings and those collected through the research process, are understood to reflect not “an assessment of internal representations but rather as an emergent product of representations and features in which narratives

are told” (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007, p. 264). That is, when autobiographical narratives are disclosed, they capture aspects of narrative identity as well as the contexts in which these stories are produced. If this theorizing is correct, then the content of the ‘same’ narrative likely differs dramatically from one context to the next.

Consistent with this notion, several studies have examined the influence that subtle modifications to the social context exhibit on the content of narrators’ stories. Pasupathi and Hoyt (2009), for example, observed that narrators were more likely to describe autobiographical memories using interpretative or explanatory, as opposed to simply factual, information when in the presence of an attentive listener and Bavelas, Coates, and Johnson (2000) found that listeners’ reactions (e.g., head nodding) impacted the quality of the narratives participants disclosed. Similarly, Weeks and Pasupathi (2011) found that, when pairs of narrators and listeners interacted, the degree to which the listener was responsive predicted the likelihood that the narrator later endorsed the belief that the event described provided insight and/or revealed something new about him or herself (and such self-integration is critical in the identity development process). Although it appears that the behaviors of the listener impact the content of the narratives disclosed, research by Pennebaker, Hughes, and O’Heeron (1987) and others has highlighted the possibility that the presence, as compared to the absence, of a listener may impact the content of the autobiographical narratives disclosed to a greater degree. Pennebaker and colleagues found that participants were less likely to disclose traumatic events in the presence of a listener as

\* Corresponding author at: Department of Psychology, University of California, Riverside, Riverside, CA 92521, United States.

E-mail addresses: [tmcco002@ucr.edu](mailto:tmcco002@ucr.edu) (T.P. McCoy), [wdunlop@ucr.edu](mailto:wdunlop@ucr.edu) (W.L. Dunlop).

compared to when they these participants were left in a laboratory room alone and prompted to describe their experiences while being recorded via tape recorder. Furthermore, researchers have considered whether spoken as compared to written disclosure differentially relates to certain outcome variables (e.g., Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006).

There are several noteworthy implications to draw from this previous research. First, it appears as though the social features of an environment (e.g., listener presence, listener behaviors) impact narrative disclosure (e.g., Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2009; Weeks & Pasupathi, 2011; Pennebaker et al., 1987). Second, it appears as though the format in which the narrative is produced (viz. whether it is spoken or written) may also impact the resulting content (e.g., Lyubomirsky et al., 2006). Thus, the presence/absence of a listener and the response format of the narrative itself may lead to different recounts of their self-definitional experiences (e.g., when taking with a friend, when making a journal entry) as well as the assessment contexts used by researchers both inside and outside of laboratory settings.

Despite the considerable ground that has been covered by previous research examining the role assessment contexts yield on the content of autobiographical narratives, several deficiencies exist in this area of research. First, researchers have yet to consider the ways in which accounts of key scenes (e.g., high points, low points) differ as a function of features of the assessment contexts. This is unfortunate as these key scenes represent the life blood of narrative identity (Dunlop, 2015) as well as the categories of stories most commonly considered in narrative research. Second, researchers examining the ways in which narratives differ across contexts have yet to incorporate in their work a consideration of the linguistic and conceptual features of narratives that are most commonly assessed within personality and social psychology (e.g., pronoun use, redemptive imagery). Finally, previous research has yet to manipulate both the presence/absence of an interviewer and the response format of narratives in the context of a single study. As a result, it is currently unclear whether one of these factors may yield a larger impact on narrative content relative to the other as well as whether these features of the assessment context may interact in meaningful ways. Thus, although it is known that narratives are sensitive to the features of contexts in which they are produced, researchers have yet to examine the ways and degree to which the narratives that are typically considered in personality psychology (i.e., key scenes), as well as resulting linguistic and conceptual categories most commonly drawn from these scenes, may vary across two of the major dimensions relevant to assessment contexts (viz. the presence of an interviewer/listener and the response format of the narrative in question). Due to the many inferences that researchers have drawn and continue to draw from these key scenes (see Adler et al., 2016), this gap in the literature need be addressed.

### 1.1. The present study

In the present study, we sought to investigate differences in the linguistic and conceptual content of key scenes as a function of the sociality of the situation (i.e., the presence or absence of an interviewer) and the response format (i.e., written vs. spoken). Participants provided three key scenes from within one of four contexts within a 2(interviewer; present, absent)  $\times$  2 (response type; verbal, written) experimental study design. The resulting narrative material was quantified in terms of the most reliable, and frequently considered, linguistic and conceptual categories in the literature. Thus, in the current project we were most interested in determining the degree to which assessment contexts influence a representative sample of variables derived from a representative sample of narratives, rather than any specific narrative variable

per se. In this sense, the current work was not driven by any particular theory pertaining to assessment contexts and/or narrative dimensions. Rather, the purpose of examining autobiographical narratives within this design was to shine a light on the potential effects various, commonplace assessment characteristics (e.g., interviewer presence) may have on the linguistic and conceptual characteristics of narratives and narrative variables most frequently considered by personality psychologists. In this regard the 2  $\times$  2 nature of our design represented a mixed blessing insofar as it required certain combinations of contextual variables that are infrequently represented in the literature (e.g., composing written narratives while in the company of an interviewer), relative to others, but it also allowed us to cleanly tease out the existence of main effects and interactions between these (potentially) important features of assessment contexts.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

In order to detect a medium effect with an alpha value set at 0.10, it was necessary to have a total sample size of 175 participants (Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996). In the interest of meeting this requisite, while also satisfying calls for more high powered studies within psychological science (e.g., Fraley & Vazire, 2014), we sought to collect 100 observations in each of our four experimental conditions. Consistent with this objective, 413 undergraduates were recruited for this study from our institution. They received course credit in exchange for their participation in this study. Ten participants did not complete all portions of the study and one participant was visually impaired which prevented his random assignment to all conditions. As a result, these 11 participants were excluded from all subsequent analyses, resulting in a sample of 402 individuals. This sample had a mean age of 19.44 years ( $SD = 1.81$ ) and was ethnically diverse, consisting of participants who self-identified as Asian-American (40%), Hispanic/Latino (35%), White/Caucasian (9%), African-American (6%), and Pacific Islander (2%). Two hundred and seventy-seven participants identified as female.

### 2.2. Procedures

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions within a 2 (interviewer; present, absent)  $\times$  2 (response type; verbal, written) study design. In all conditions, assessments took place in a private room in an on-campus laboratory (i.e., participants were run individually). For the various conditions, participants were either interviewed (interviewer present) or left alone in the interview room (interviewer absent). Conditions also varied as a function of response type such that participants were either asked to provide their narratives orally (verbal) or type them via a computer (written). In the absence of an interviewer, participants were provided with written prompts for key scenes. In verbal conditions, responses were documented via a digital audio recorder. In each of these four conditions, participants provided three key scenes from their lives, reflecting high points, low points, and turning points. The prompts used to solicit descriptions of these scenes were taken directly from the commonly used Life Story Interview (LSI; McAdams, 2008).

All research assistants for this project (including the interviewers) were female. This was done (a) in order to maintain consistency across experimental conditions and (b) because both men and women feel more comfortable disclosing information to females (Habermas, 2011). Interviewers were instructed to read the entirety of prompts to participants, address any clarifying

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5046268>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5046268>

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