Taking a step back: Self-distancing dynamics in adolescent writing about peer problems

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ABSTRACT

Can the retelling of an unpleasant experience help adolescents cope with that experience? This study answers that question by looking at the role of psychological self-distancing when adolescents write about recently untold stressful events with peers using either a traditional expressive writing (EW) intervention or a cognitively oriented expressive writing (CEW) intervention. Extent of self-distancing (i.e., low and high) as well as its variability (i.e., increasing or stable) were taken into account. Data, obtained from 292 written essays from 78 Italian adolescents (mean age was 12.9; 50% was female), were collected longitudinally on four occasions. Group-based trajectory modeling determined the extent and variability in self-distancing for the two writing interventions (i.e., EW and CEW) and two baseline peer problem conditions (i.e., low and high). Findings indicate that, for adolescents who experience high peer problems at baseline, CEW intervention fosters meaning-making through self-distancing, resulting in being more beneficial than traditional EW.

In this study, Italian adolescents retold stressful peer problem events with a set of either traditional expressive writing (EW) or cognitively oriented expressive writing (CEW) sessions. "Stressful peer events" were operationalized as an occurrence that happened at a determinable time and place, whereas "peer problems" refer to the level of vulnerability exhibited by participants (for example, social isolation—"*I'm usually on my own,*" and bullying victimization—"*Other children or young people pick on me or bully me*"). We purposely looked at the process "behind" that retelling and whether changes over time reflected different psychological self-distancing patterns. In this sense, we first turn our attention to the model of psychological self-distance since previous research has established the key role of this mechanism in written emotional disclosure (e.g., Park, Ayduk, & Kross, 2016; Pennebaker, Facchin, & Margola, 2010), then we discuss expressive writing paradigm as well as our previous findings (i.e., Travagin, Margola, Dennis, & Revenson, 2016). Along the way we will clarify our operational definition of psychological self-distance before we finally illustrate and discuss the results of the current study.

1. Self-distancing among adolescents

Our capacity to retell past stressful experiences in new meaningful ways is crucial for personal health and well-being (Pennebaker et al., 2010), and in this context self-distancing matters (Kross & Ayduk, 2017; Park et al., 2016). Self-distancing is an adaptive strategy based on "self-decentering" which allows one to retell a past stressful experience while "taking a step back" (Kross & Ayduk, 2017, p. 113) as an external observer, in order to look at the bigger picture rather than from an immersed perspective where "the

emotionally arousing details of what happened" (Kross & Ayduk, 2017, p. 84) can be overwhelming. Self-distancing is, therefore, not a strategy designed to active self-distraction or active avoidance nor can it be described as being a type of defense mechanism. Overall, self-distancing can reduce emotional involvement as it can lead to a better evaluation of the situation (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Kross & Ayduk, 2011, 2017).

The retelling of past stressful experiences from a self-distanced perspective can be particularly useful for adolescents as they tend to be more emotionally involved than late adolescents as well as adults when remembering past stressful events, to have a greater tendency to ruminate, and to show more frequent negative emotional experiences (Kross, Duckworth, Ayduk, Tsukayama, & Mischel, 2011; Larson, Moneta, Richards, & Wilson, 2002). Research indicates that a psychological self-distant perspective can allow adolescents to better assess the context of their problems, the degree of control they have over the situation, and the appropriateness of their adjustment responses (Dundas, 2000; Goodman & Southam-Gerow, 2010; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Skinner, 2002). These benefits happen when the retelling task moves towards a reconstruction of stressful events, rather than a simple recounting of those events (White, Kross, & Duckworth, 2015). In this sense, the benefits of self-distancing in fostering adaptive self-reflection among adolescents doesn't translate into avoidance dynamics but rather it helps them to approach events with greater objectivity (e.g., Kross et al., 2011). Such benefits concern other positive outcomes, e.g., lower levels of negative affect, overall reduced distress and emotional reactivity, not to mention a broader spectrum of adaptive coping skills (e.g., White et al., 2015).

When it comes to adolescence, coping skills are a critical area of research (Clarke, 2006), which has mainly described the correlates and predictors of successful vs. unsuccessful coping skills in the domain of peer relationships. In general, unsuccessful peer relationships can be considered as a salient stressor for adolescents in terms of poor adjustment, mental health and psychosocial problems (e.g., Moore et al., 2017; Seiffge-Krenke, 2006), including conditions such as victimization, peer rejection and isolation, and an overall lack of friendships, which have been related—among others—to deliberate self-harm (e.g., Jutengren, Kerr, & Stattin, 2011), depression (e.g., La Greca, Davila, & Siegel, 2008), emotional disorders (from disruptiveness to loneliness; e.g., Pedersen, Vitaro, Barker, & Borge, 2007), social anxiety (e.g., Siegel, La Greca, & Harrison, 2009), as well as lower academic achievement and motivation (e.g., Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004).

2. Self-distancing and adjustment over time

Somewhat surprisingly, previous research has never argued for a *varying level* of psychological self-distance when retelling past stressful events, let alone in the case of adolescents. One way of looking at psychological self-distance is in terms of its *extent* (generally assessed at a given time)—such that when it is low one can feel a high level of emotional involvement, whereas when it is high one can feel a low level of emotional involvement (e.g., Kross & Ayduk, 2011). However, another way of looking at psychological self-distance is in terms of its *variability* (progressively)—such that its "distance" from the self can either increase and/or decrease gradually or, instead, be temporally stable (e.g., Habermas & Berger, 2011). Thus, if psychological self-distance is high and stable, this might reflect either an absence of personal meaning in the experience (i.e., "*It wasn't really a problem after all*") or the presence of avoidance mechanisms (i.e., "*It was really a problem but I cannot handle it*"—see Nelson & Horowitz, 2001). On the contrary, if psychological self-distance is initially low and becomes higher over time, this could denote a process where adolescents constructively engage themselves in their narratives, resulting in a gradual self-reflection dynamic over the course of time (see, for example, Ayduk & Kross, 2010). However, the problem remains how to operationalize psychological self-distance, especially considering the risk of confusing it with avoidance or other defense mechanisms.

In this paper, self-distancing was operationalized by looking at the use of temporal sentences in the narrative retelling (for another perspective see also the construct of "narrative involvement"; Nelson, Bein, Huemer, Ryst, & Steiner, 2009; Nelson & Horowitz, 2001). We define "temporal sentences" as "tensed sentences" (as opposed to generic present or indefinite and gnomic tenses), largely based on temporal adverbs as well as conditional and temporal clauses. When people are faced with stressful experiences they try to integrate them into a life narrative that provides convincing causal explanations, meaning, and coherence for the self (e.g., McAdams, 2006). Initially, people create an emotional connection with their past, resulting in a high use of temporal sentences where the narrator is mentally immersed in the past. Gradually, narratives tend to become less temporally complex, poor in detail, and more focused on the present and less on the self (Beike & Wirth-Beaumont, 2005; Crawley, 2010; Habermas & Berger, 2011). From a developmental perspective, this decrease in overall complexity may reflect a gradual process of assimilation and psychological self-distancing, resulting in emotional and cognitive adjustment (Ayduk & Kross, 2010; Kross & Ayduk, 2011, 2017). This type of psychological self-distancing is best described as *progressing from low to high*, therefore as *progressively increasing*. However, when narratives continue to include enduring details of the past with an ongoing descriptive complexity, this may denote maladaptive processes such as rumination and defensiveness (Beike & Wirth-Beaumont, 2005; Kross, Ayduk, & Mischel, 2005; Nelson et al., 2009). This type of psychological self-distancing is best described as *low and temporally stable*. Likewise, when narratives are consistently less temporally complex, poor in detail, and more focused on the present and less on the self, this may indicate maladaptive processes such as avoidance (Nelson & Horowitz, 2001). This type of psychological self-distancing is best described as *high and temporally stable*.

In sum, the extent and variability through which adolescents construct narratives with a temporal structure can denote whether they are keeping a psychological self-distance from their experience. While this hypothesis is consistent with research on psychological distancing mechanisms and emotional involvement in youth, the adaptive role of this process can and should be determined via a longitudinal perspective (Park et al., 2016). In fact, if this process were to be studied only at a given particular time, it could conceal rumination (i.e., low and stable self-distance), an avoidance reaction or self-distraction to the event (i.e., high and stable self-distance), or even a lack of a real meaning of the targeted event. The key point here is that different self-distancing longitudinal patterns may connote different information processing in terms of emotional and cognitive adjustment (Park et al., 2016). Moreover,