



## Brief Report

# Meaning making during high and low point life story episodes predicts emotion regulation two years later: How the past informs the future

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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Available online 14 March 2014

## Keywords:

Narrative identity  
Emotion regulation  
Emotional memory

## ABSTRACT

Memory processes are commonly thought to relate to a host of personality systems. The current study specifies a particular way that memory relates to personality. Highly-valenced, identity-rich memories – high and low point episodes in the life story – were analyzed to see if aspects of these memories predicted self-reports of emotion regulation two years later. Meaning making in high and low points predicted emotion regulation. Moreover, valence mattered. Positive meaning making in high and low point stories predicted positive emotion regulation while negative meaning making in low point stories predicted negative emotion regulation. These relationships held while controlling for baseline extraversion, neuroticism, and memory word count. Limitations due to study design are discussed.

Published by Elsevier Inc.

## 1. Introduction

Research from personality, developmental, social, and cognitive psychology supports the claim that the way an individual constructs the personal past reveals current psychological functioning (e.g., Conway & Pleydell-Pearce, 2000; McAdams, 2001). The remember-er is revealed by his or her rememberings. As one application of this general principle, researchers have recently turned their attention to the relationship between valenced memory and emotion regulation, the specific ways individuals respond to emotions once they arise (e.g. Denkova, Dolcos, & Dolcos, 2012; Wisco & Nolen-Hoksema, 2010). The current study examines longitudinal associations between memories for emotionally intense scenes in one's life story and self-report indices of emotion regulation.

The life story is a person's internalized and evolving narrative of the self, integrating the reconstructed past with an imagined future (McAdams, 2001). Punctuating the life story are the recollections of especially significant scenes in one's life, such as high points and low points. These emotionally valenced life story episodes often reveal important personality themes that relate to emotional processes and psychological well-being (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

High and low point stories typically express instances of autobiographical reasoning, the active process of deriving abstract meaning about the self from the recollection of concrete

autobiographical scenes (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). In some instances, narrators derive positive meaning from specific autobiographical scenes, suggesting that the scene illustrates a positive trend in their own life or personality. In other instances, the meanings derived are decidedly negative, which, at times, suggest the narrator sees the episode as pointing to a negative trajectory in his or her life.

Like autobiographical reasoning, emotion regulation is also a valenced construct. Positive emotion regulation strategies indicate the ability to adaptively respond to negative emotional experiences, and include such skills as reframing a negative and refocusing on a positive. Negative emotion regulation strategies indicate a maladaptive response to negative emotional content that amplifies or prolongs the negative emotions, and include responses such as catastrophizing and rumination.

The current project investigates narrative meaning in the life story and emotion regulation in a longitudinal context and hypothesizes that valenced meaning making will predict valenced emotion regulation strategies. High and low point memories can be a cue for emotions in the present, e.g. the memory of the death of a loved one produces sadness in the current moment. How an individual makes sense of memory-induced emotions as he or she tells the story of the past event is an instance of online emotion regulation. For example, in constructing a low point story of the death of a loved one, an individual might respond to the memory-cued, current sadness by *catastrophizing* the consequences of the event, and in so doing attribute high levels of negative meaning to the episode. Alternatively, an individual's ability to construct

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elaborate and positive meaning from a high point, might reflect a more general tendency to focus on positive attributes of a stimulus, an ability that in other scenarios would bolster positive emotion regulation efforts. In this way, constructing meaning in high and low point stories evinces emotion regulation in an identity-rich memory context. The ability to regulate emotions in life story construction might predict emotion regulation more generally.

In the present study, it is hypothesized that narrative meaning will predict emotion regulation skills two years later. In addition, the broad dispositions of extraversion, or positive emotionality, and neuroticism, or negative emotionality (McCrae & Costa, 2008), will be used as statistical controls. These controls will help test for a unique relationship between narrative meaning and emotion regulation beyond trait levels of positive and negative affect. Moreover, memory word count will also be used as a statistical control to rule out meaning making as simply a proxy for greater verbal elaboration.

## 2. Method

**Sample and Procedure:** Sample is a cohort of 164 Chicago-area adults ranging in age from 55 to 58 years at study inception. The sample is approximately 55% Caucasian-American and 43% African-American. 1 participant identified as inter-racial and 2 identified as “other.” Participants were recruited through a professional recruitment company, which employed mailers and advertisements. Upon entering the study, participants completed online self-report measures of the Big Five, among other questionnaires. A week or two later, participants travelled to Northwestern University, where they completed a life-story interview, which included a high and low point. The high point is described as a moment that, “stands out as an especially positive experience...an especially happy, joyous exciting, or wonderful moment in the story.” The low point is described as the opposite of the high point. “Thinking back over your entire life, please identify a scene that stands out as a low point, if not *the* low point in your life story. . .” In both cases participants are asked to describe the event in detail and discuss what the scene may say about who they are as a person. Two years later, participants completed online self-report measure of emotion regulation strategies, among other questionnaires.

### 2.1. Measures

**Extraversion and Neuroticism:** The extraversion and neuroticism sub-scales from the NEO Five Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI; McCrae & Costa, 2004) were employed. Each sub-scale contains 12 self-report items. Each item pertains to one sub-scale. For example, the neuroticism sub-scale includes the statement, “I often feel inferior to others.” Responses range from “1” for “strongly disagree” to “5” for “strongly agree.” McCrae and Costa (2004) reported good psychometric properties for the NEO-FFI, including the extraversion and neuroticism sub-scales. In the current study both sub-scales had acceptable internal consistency: neuroticism, Cronbach’s alpha = .74; extraversion, Cronbach’s alpha = .74). The NEO-FFI was completed at time 1.

**Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire:** The Cognitive Emotion Regulation Questionnaire (CERQ; Garnefski, Kraaij, & Spinhoven, 2001) is a 36-item scale measuring nine cognitive coping strategies individuals use after a difficult life experience. Four of the sub-scales are considered negative strategies (Self-blame, Other-blame, Rumination, Catastrophizing), with five considered as positive strategies (Positive refocusing, Planning, Positive reappraisal, Putting into perspective and Acceptance). Each item pertains to one sub-scale. For example, for self-blame, the

respondent is asked when faced with difficult or unpleasant events he or she generally, “feel that I am the one to blame for it.” Responses range from “1” for “almost never” to “4” for “almost always.” Garnefski et al. (2001) reported good psychometric properties for the overall scale and the sub-scales, as it did in the current study (e.g., internal consistency by valence: negative emotion regulation strategies, Cronbach’s alpha = .79; positive emotion regulation strategies, Cronbach’s alpha = .90). The CERQ was completed at time 2.

**Coding the Narratives:** The Life Story Interviews were conducted at time 1. They were recorded and transcribed. Accounts of high points ranged from 86 to 2742 words, with a mean length of 653 ( $SD = 445$ ). For low points, length ranged from 71 to 3046 words,  $M = 799$  ( $SD = 510$ ).

**Positive and Negative Meaning:** The meaning code focuses upon where the narrator steps back from the episodic action of the experience and reflects upon the meaning of the episode with regard to the self or world. This code is a form of autobiographical reasoning (Habermas & Bluck, 2000), and the coding rules drew upon a coding manual developed by Thorne et al. (2004).

Meaning-making commonly occurs at the conclusion of a narrative, as occurs in the example below. After learning that her 1 year old son had a chronic disease, the participant’s nuclear family moved across the country to be close to extended family for support. The extended family was generally unsupportive as illustrated for the participant in her low point story of the extended family disregarding dietary needs of her son at a family event. The participant made the following *negative meaning* in response to the interviewer’s question about what the memory said about her as a person:

Oh, just how horrible it was. Hurt [crying] also, and you know what, what’s that when you feel – helpless. I couldn’t change it. I couldn’t change [my son] and I couldn’t change my family. I could only change the way I cope with it, which didn’t help at all. And this is such a stupid thing about food, you know, but [my son] could die [crying]. How many people cry when they come here?

Oh, it was terrible. [Crying] You bury it and you don’t talk about it for years and years but it’s still there. . .

Each narrative was given a coding score for both positive and negative meaning. The scores were 0 (absence of meaning-making), 1 (minimal, non-impactful, or non-elaborated meaning-making) and 2 (elaborated and impactful meaning-making). The above example received a 0 for *positive meaning* and a 2 for *negative meaning*. Two coders independently coded the narratives for positive and negative meaning. Intercoder reliability was  $r = .79$  for positive meaning and  $r = .75$  for negative meaning. Disagreements between coders were resolved through consensus discussion.

### 2.2. Analysis procedures

Analyses were completed using SPSS 20. A power analysis was completed. Previous studies often find relationships between narrative codes and trait self-report measures with small to medium effect sizes (e.g., McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). With an anticipated effect of  $r^2 = .06$ , statistical power level of .80, and  $p$ -value of .05, the sample size should exceed 130 participants, which the current study does.

## 3. Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for study variables. 10 participants were lost to follow up at time 2. Independent samples

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